



# Arkham Tales

A MAGAZINE OF WEIRD FICTION

Issue #5

NOVEMBER 2009

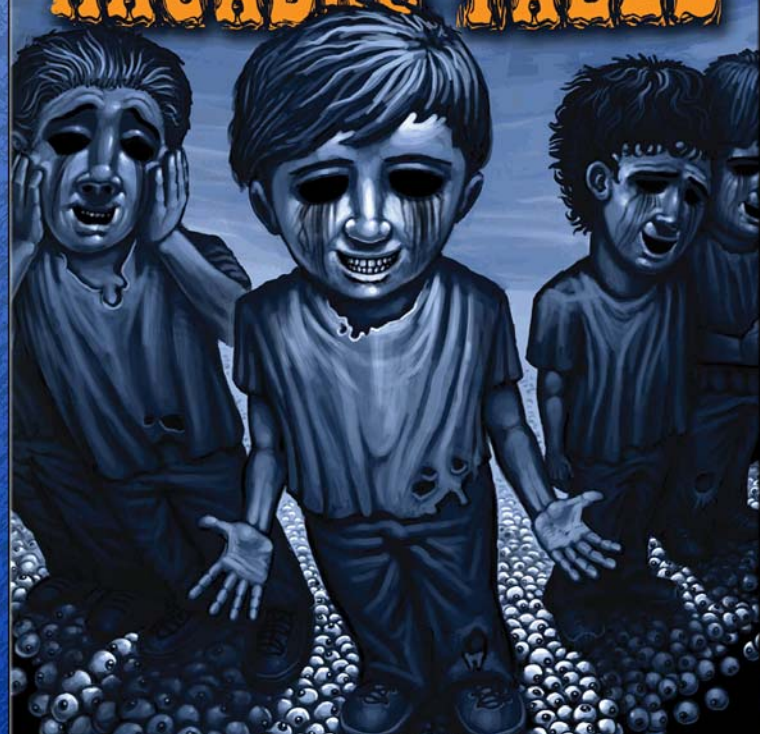
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# Arkham Tales

A MAGAZINE OF WEIRD FICTION

Issue #5

November 2009

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Editorial Board ..... Crispin Burnham, Christopher B. Jackson

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## EDITORIAL: THE END OF A STRANGE AEON

Nathan Shumate

AS YOU MAY HAVE GATHERED FROM THE BIG, BOLD WORDS ON THE COVER, this will be the last issue of *Arkham Tales*. It's not because of a lack of content; far from it. I have enough stories in inventory to fill the magazine for at least the next three years. Readership has been a little low of late; I reckon that once we temporarily closed to submissions to burn off some of the already-accepted stories, there were fewer prospective contributors who downloaded a copy to check us out as a market. (I didn't realize exactly how much of our readership was such prospective contributors, but...) That, though, is merely a contributory cause.

The real problem is the lack of advertisers. When I began *Arkham Tales*, my back-of-the-envelope calculations (imprecision being a luxury of a seat-of-the-pants operation) showed that I needed to sell about ten pages of advertising per issue to pay for the fiction that filled the other pages. *Shucks*, I thought, *how hard could that be?* I was thinking this in August 2008, when planning for the first issue began in earnest. Of course, by the time Issue #1 was released in November 2008, the American economy had done a swan dive which would cause palpitations of admiration in the most hardened of Olympic judges. The tight budgets of the small-press community, which were the natural potential advertisers for such a venture, became tighter still.

After reassessing the performance of the first issue, my goal for the next year of operation was to have one issue which broke even. It was a fairly concrete deadline, as the credit card which I had been using for my operating funds had a fairly low limit, one which this fifth issue comes close to reaching. Not that having a higher credit limit would make the picture rosy; the fact is that as much as I enjoy publishing the magazine, I can't justify paying a couple hundred dollars per issue for the privilege.

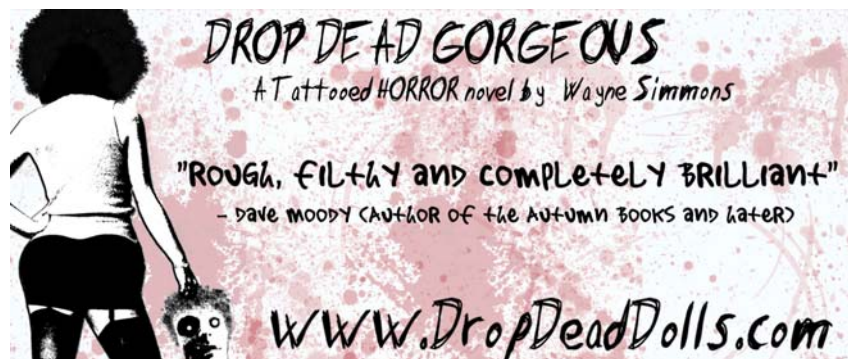
My hearty thanks to those advertisers who did step up and risk their money in supporting this venture. As I've mentioned to them

several times, these PDF issues will be available in perpetuity; even after active publication has ceased, curious readers will still be able to peruse the five-issue run and the advertisers will still benefit from their calculated gamble.

A thanks also to all those who submitted work for the magazine. I was astounded by how much jaw-droppingly good fiction there was out there, and how many talented and skilled writers were eager to be paid a penny per word for their efforts. If I weren't losing money on each issue, I would long ago have stepped up to at least a bi-monthly schedule, so that I wouldn't have to be so arbitrary in what I accepted (and so those authors whose work I did accept wouldn't have to wait so long to see their stories in the magazine).

Many, many thanks to Chris Jackson and Crispin Burnham, who read all the manuscripts along with me and who acted as sounding boards for cover art candidates and other design issues. I sometimes refer to *Arkham Tales* as a one-man show, but in reality it's only the decision-making authority that was concentrated in one man; the gruntwork was farmed out liberally.

And plentiful thanks, finally, to those who have read *Arkham Tales* and enjoyed it, whether you've written to express your enjoyment or not. Literature is like any medium of communication: it is an incomplete expression of the art until it has a receiver. In that sense, then, *Arkham Tales* literally could not have existed without its readership. Take that as a cautionary statement and be discerning in those matters to which you lend attention. Who knows what ghastly thing you might bring into existence by your mere attention? ●



## THE CAVERNS OF AL-SHOG QALETH

Robert J. Santa

THE GROTESQUE ABOMINATION ROLLED ITS MASS FORWARD IN A WAVE meant to crush Khalil. He leapt back then back again as the thing predictably thrust itself at him a second time. Fully extended, it could do nothing while Khalil swept his scimitar. The transparent skin looked delicate but held the thickness of whale blubber. The great sword bit deeply. Through the slice, the thing's gelatinous innards spilled. It reared up but in so doing aggravated the wound. Like a burst wineskin, it settled onto the cavern floor surrounded by its own liquids.

Khalil waited. The thing flopped once more, a savage release of its remaining strength. Even before it finished this spasm, Khalil retrieved his torch and stepped past it.

The tunnel exhaled, the freakish movement of air groaning out as if in complaint. Though it sounded like the wailing of a forlorn beast, Khalil knew it was nothing more than air. He proceeded down the sloping tunnel, eyes always probing ahead into the darkness.

Dread filled Khalil as he came to the end of the tunnel. A blind turn, a drop to a cavern into which he could not see, and the gurgling of a stream that drowned out all other sound combined in a way that made it impossible for him to be prepared. Khalil dropped the torch. Darkness enveloped him, but the rough circle of the hole glowed with faint firelight. He held his sword close and fell after the torch.

Khalil hit the ground and felt his foot roll over. He turned with it and landed hard on his side, but his ankle remained sound. Misfortune struck him squarely, however, as his tumble wrenched the torch from him and smothered it.

Only the fringes of the luminescent moss colonies clung to the cavern wall, and Khalil's eyes were not yet adjusted to the gloom. Khalil squatted in the dark and strained his ears. The nearby stream spoke to him in alien syllables that echoed from three cross tunnels. At times it sounded like flopping. Khalil's heart raced with tension, yet his hands were steady as he reached into one of the sturdy, leather packets

on his belt to retrieve a flint and steel.

He scraped the flint beside the torch. Sparks jumped away in random directions as if fleeing the metal. Some few landed on the torch, but it was not enough to ignite the pitch. Khalil heard something nearby and stayed his hands. The stream gurgled. Air moaned through the tunnels. His pulse thudded in his ears like footsteps.

Khalil gave the flint a long strike. A shower of dying lightning bugs landed on the torch. It burst to life and showed Khalil the wall of protoplasmic horror not arm's length from him.

It collapsed toward him. From a squatting position, Khalil could do nothing more than fall backwards. The thing landed on his boots, and he kicked away. He scrambled back like a crab as the blasphemous thing flopped after him. With another disgusting heave of its mass, the monstrosity landed on the torch and once more plunged the cavern into near total black. Beside the torch, somewhere underneath the now invisible thing, lay Khalil's scimitar.

Khalil drew the khanjar from its sheath. The knife's curved blade was as sharp as the ocean horizon, yet the protective feel of the grip in his palm drowned in the knowledge that it was a useless weapon against the horror somewhere before him.

The thing shuffled, a distinct noise. Khalil stepped to his left and swung the knife in a wide arc. It connected heavy flesh, and he dragged its blade. The thing retreated from the khanjar's deadly touch. Khalil stepped into the attack and pressed the knife in and across. The thing continued to fall back. The side of Khalil's foot touched something hard, though whether it was the torch or his sword he could not tell.

Khalil gambled and stooped to retrieve the scimitar. Luck continued to elude him as his fingers wrapped around the tarry head of the torch. The thing shuffled loudly, and he knew that it was raised and ready to strike. Khalil spread himself on the cavern floor. His elbow touched the scimitar's pommel.

A rushing of air signaled the thing's attack. Khalil dropped the knife and stood the torch on its head. His hand found a firm grip on the handle of the scimitar as the monster covered him. Its weight pressed him down, and he was helpless.

The torch punctured the thing's skin and washed Khalil with vile juices. The thing reacted to the wound by lifting itself—not much, but enough for Khalil to bring his sword up. When the monster fell on him again, it took the fullness of his blade. Khalil wriggled his left arm and managed to move it to the sword. He sliced at the thing as if it were a

roasted haunch. The thing tried to lift itself off of him and failed. Its wet innards exploded over Khalil, and it settled onto him like a carpet left in the rain.

Khalil pushed himself through the thing's wound and climbed out of its carcass. His headdress clung to his face and neck. He untied the cord and flung the soaking keffiyeh away. He crawled on the disgusting floor and found the flint and steel. He scraped the thing's bowels from the torch's head and struck the flint. Luck finally found him as the torch caught with weak flame. It took a long time for the torch to gain strength, and Khalil passed the time by stripping himself of his robes heavy with gore. He wanted to dip his hands into the stream and wash the vile taste of the thing from his mouth, but the stream passed through much of the cavern. He refrained and swallowed hard against the bile in his throat.

Stripped to a mere wrapping around his loins and a short tunic, Khalil shivered against the cavern's cool air. His toes squished inside his boots, and he tried not think about the monster's fluids touching his skin. He clasped his heavy belt around his middle and set off down the largest tunnel.

The moss colonies grew until they linked. Beyond the flickering torchlight, Khalil could see the full length of the tunnel and the side caverns. The air hung heavy with wetness, like invisible curtains. He knew he could set the torch aside but feared discarding its comforting brightness. He also knew it was an eventuality he could not avoid. Khalil rolled the torch on the floor until it extinguished and set the flint beside it. Then he joined the items on the ground and prayed to Allah. He figured it was as good a time as any, and every little bit helped.

The time in prayer allowed his eyes to become accustomed to the scant light. It was as if the moss were thousands of tiny candles that grew in strength as the wax melted beneath their wicks. Before he was done declaring Allah's greatness, he could see as well as if the torch were still lit. The prayers did little to settle him. He nevertheless hefted his scimitar and advanced toward the brood cavern.

A grotesque thing oozed through a tiny side tunnel. It forced its way through an opening too small to allow quick passage. Khalil casually drew his sword across the thing's ballooning mass. Gore exploded out like vomit from a poisoned animal. Khalil did not even break stride to confirm the thing's death.

The last long slope widened like a snake's mouth over a dead rat. The moss grew in abundance, fed by the geothermic pools deep below.



The walls blazed with a greenish-yellow glow the color of phlegm. A giant pool in the center of the cavern bubbled, but Khalil knew it was composed of neither mud nor water. It was the hideous form of al-Shog Qaleth herself.

The brood queen heaved an edge of her mass. An appendage of protoplasmic filth pulled away from the main body. The skin separating them tore, and the freed newborn flopped away. Khalil's stomach turned. He would have vomited had he not fasted before making the descent.

For what must have been the fiftieth time since entering the tunnels, Khalil cursed his fate for choosing the white rock and not the black, signifying who would face al-Shog Qaleth and who would remain behind. He contemplated turning back. Deep inside, in the places where he told himself the truth, he desperately wanted to escape the cavern. But he was still in a place where he lied, and he thought about retreat in ways that would justify his lack of bravery.

Khalil sighed heavily and whispered another, slightly more sincere prayer to Allah. Then he stepped fully into the cavern's light.

"I am here!" he roared.

With the echoes of his voice still slurring back to him, al-Shog Qaleth reacted as if she were a sleeping cat wakened by a dog's nearby barking. Her whole body jumped and shook in fits and rippling waves. A massive bubble formed on the boundary closest to Khalil. An obscene thing ejaculated from al-Shog Qaleth, followed by a second and a third. They all charged as one toward Khalil, who braced himself for their onslaught.

Khalil lifted his scimitar and felt his bowels shake. Behind the wall of wet abominations, al-Shog Qaleth birthed another two.

He stepped and swung, slicing the top off the lead beast's flesh. It moved radically, away from the pain but also laterally toward Khalil. It was an unexpected move, suggestive of the brood queen's influence over her children. Where Khalil meant to attack the thing's flank, he instead dove and rolled. The thing crashed to the ground where he had just been. Liquid putrescence spewed out of its wound. Khalil smelled it and gagged as he rose.

Surrounded, Khalil contemplated. His time in thought was brief but effective. He slashed again at the wounded thing: two heavy chops as if Khalil were splitting logs with an axe. The beast flew apart, and Khalil stepped through the wet opening. The second pair of beasts advanced. Khalil thrust into the center of one, and as it drew away



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from steel's touch, Khalil pressed and heaved the blade upward. The thing exploded, covering him in more gore and slime.

The knowledge that he was going to be wounded regardless of his actions came to him in a rush. Turning away from the rising thing beside him, Khalil stepped into the attack of another. It battered him with the strength of an ox, and he flew backwards. His heels touched cavern floor. Khalil spun to his shoulder but cracked his head on unyielding stone. Bright light flashed in his eyes. He gained his feet quickly, and his world spun. Flopping noises issued from all around him, impossible to decipher in the echoing chamber.

Khalil staggered back in what he felt was away from the brood queen and her advancing children. He held his scimitar before him and waved it. It would have frightened a mob, yet he knew these stupid beasts would continue to move towards him until their flesh was cut. Tripping on a stone, he almost fell. In the same moment, something touched the tip of his sword. Khalil drew it back and swung, stepping into the cut. His vision cleared in time to see the scimitar pass through the entirety of an advancing thing. Its top half emptied like an overturned bucket while its lower half collapsed.

Khalil noticed his blind movement carried him up a short slope. The beasts continued to flop after him, three more produced by the desperate queen, but they had trouble racing up even the gentlest incline. Like a caterpillar that can only move its rear once its forelegs have found good grip, the closest thing could either move or attack Khalil. It ruptured at the touch of his blade, as did the next that strained up the slope. He wanted to wade into them, to destroy these things that slandered Allah's name merely with their existence. Yet he held his blade and stepped back, further up the ramp.

They came at him like the flowing tide of the great, inland sea, with

relentless persistence. Far behind the mob, looking flattened and sickly, al-Shog Qaleth gave a great heave and vomited forth a stillborn thing. Khalil smiled, even as the nearest of her children flopped at him.

Like the one forced into the too-small opening in the tunnel, these things fell easily before Khalil's scimitar. His patience became as strained as the brood mother's desperate and childless struggling. The awful things inched closer, and he could resist the fighting urge no longer. He stepped between the last two and slashed with abandon. One of them touched his toes, setting its mass for an attack. As he cut it open like a butcher eviscerating a hog, it spilled its liquid contents over his leg and into his boot. The second died with no less disgusting outpouring of its innards.

Alone with al-Shog Qaleth, Khalil breathed heavily. It was not the violence that came before that made him take in air; it was the expectation of the battle to come. He steadied himself, then stepped to within leaping distance of the quivering brood mother.

"I am your destroyer," he whispered to her. He took one step forward and jabbed her with the tip of his scimitar. Against her giant body, it could have been no more an annoyance than a mosquito's quick feasting.

Yet al-Shog Qaleth reacted as if Khalil had hacked away. She pulled in the edges of her sickly dwindling mass until she formed a shape more like camel dung than a puddle of ooze. Khalil retreated. He knew his words were a lie, that his most difficult challenge was yet to come.

She struggled silently, no groans or grunts as her muscles thrust, just the occasional wet flopping as she quivered against the stone floor. A gaping wound split her skin, revealing a crown not unlike a baby's head from a woman. The resemblance ended there, for instead of being thrust into the midwife's waiting hands, this newborn ejaculated ropy tendrils and yanked itself free of its mother. Al-Shog Qaleth fell back exhausted.

Her child, though, raced after Khalil. It threw out several of dozens of tentacles, gripped the walls and the floor and launched its round body. Khalil raised his scimitar and chopped at a supporting limb. It severed with hardy resistance, as if he had cut a straw mat rolled into a tight tube. Instead of spraying liquid, as its brothers had, this thing's tentacle withdrew without so much as a spilled droplet.

Tendrils landed around him, and Khalil dove aside. The ball of the thing's body flew into the space he had been. Passing tendrils, pulled

close for movement, stretched out and tried to grab him. One brushed the side of his leg but didn't grip his wet, naked skin well enough. To Khalil it felt as if he had been swiped with a rose whose stem held dulled thorns. They hurt but not enough compared to the injuries he suspected were near.

The thing gave Khalil almost no time to recover from his dive. He tucked under his shoulder and landed cat-like but faced in the wrong direction. Before he fully spun, a tentacle wrapped around his upper thigh and simultaneously squeezed and pulled.

Allah, it burned! The strength of the beast was horrendous, and it crushed his leg as if in a smith's great tongs. He brought the blade across the tentacle's top and sliced it, though not all the way through. As the thing tried to pull him close, the strain on the damaged tendril became too much. It snapped, bloodlessly. Another three tentacles grabbed at him, but Khalil moved aside, back up the slope.

The amputated piece of tentacle continued to squeeze his leg, like a sodden leather bracelet allowed to dry and crack in the sun. He pulled at it with his left hand. It refused to release, a boa around a rat. In the corner of his eye he saw the beast follow him, gaining quickly. His leg throbbed and threatened collapse. With a savage yank, Khalil ripped the tentacle piece from his leg, removing a healthy section of skin and a little muscle in the process.

A tendril missed his head by a beard's length and secured itself to a stalagmite. Ten more fanned out on the slope. With a pull that resounded with an all-out effort, the thing dragged itself up in a single bound and collided with Khalil.

His scimitar was ready. He thrust it deep into the belly of the monster, stopped from burying the sword inside it only by the wide hilt. The thing quivered in silent agony but wrapped its closest tentacles around Khalil's arm and leg. Others flopped against his front and face, searching for purchase.

Khalil lifted himself and planted the sole of his free foot against the beast's body. He strained to put some distance between them and succeeded enough to draw out his blade. He aimed the tip and allowed the beast to pull him closer.

The scimitar drove deep, once again to the hilt. Then the beast froze. Its tentacles hung in the air, or gripped the floor, or squeezed Khalil with fleeing determination. First the one around his leg loosened, followed closely by the second. The tendrils that secured it to the floor came away with the sound of ripping parchment. With his sword still

inside it, the thing rolled down the slope and collided with al-Shog Qaleth's near motionless form.

He leaned against the stalagmite, forehead pressed against its cool, smooth surface. His breath clawed its way into his lungs as if made of brambles, and he refused to move until it was as even and effortless as when waking from a nap.

Khalil limped down the slope. Once again, good fortune found him as the beast finished its death slide with the handle of his sword up and not underneath it. He drew out the blade then turned to face the brood mother. He looked at her for a while before he found the tiny prick from his sword's tip. He buried his fingers into the cut. Al-Shog Qaleth struggled weakly, unable to pull even the tiny bit of her mass away from his touch. He dug out some of her jelly innards and smeared it on his oozing leg wound. The stuff gripped his skin and sealed it. His pain vanished instantly, replaced with soothing comfort.

Khalil raised his sword with both hands and hacked at the tentacled carcass. It split with effort, and he dropped the scimitar to pry apart the tough skin with both hands. He reached into the thing's body and pulled out a blue, liver-like organ as large as his head. Khalil took out a leather bag from one of the containers on his belt and dropped the organ into it. Then he tied its thongs to his belt and retrieved his sword.

"Next year," he said to al-Shog Qaleth, "I hope it is one of the other Wardens who draws the white stone. But while your children may torment the herds that must graze on the foothill's grasses, at least this one provides us with the cure for the autumn plague. Goodbye, brood queen. May Allah be merciful on you."

Al-Shog Qaleth did nothing, which was all she could do for at least two weeks. Khalil turned from her and walked back up the tunnels into the light. ●



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## QUEEN ANNE'S CORPSE

Doug Goodman

THE SOUTH IS FULL OF PLACES YOU DON'T WANT TO GO. ROTTEN cemeteries, hangman's barrows, and old, sagging houses, the kind that don't seem to come from anywhere. Every Southern town has one. Missing slats and broken windows. No driveway and no property line. Just an old, ugly bloated cadaver of a house. Some are gothic plantations and others are rundown shacks; all are rumored to be haunted by Civil War ghosts. Nobody ventures near these dark corners of the old Confederacy.

Jagger did not live in such a house. His home was a narrow two-story townhouse in a rigidly geometric new subdivision called Jericho Hill. Like the Biblical town, Jericho Hill was surrounded by a large concrete wall, and from his bedroom window Jagger could peer out over the wall, across the retention ditch, and into the wild unkempt fields that were mowed only once every three months. At the far end of the fields stood a small, sequestered forest. This forest, less than a hundred acres of willows, oaks, and sweetgums, was the reason Jagger's mom wanted him home before dark. At night the ululant coyotes barked and yelped from the forest.

At the edge of the fields, the grass withered and died. Only the most gnarled and spiny devil thorn grew there. Stuck in the dead zone between the uncultivated fields and the dark forest lay the old house. Yellowed as old bones and covered in long dead honeysuckle. Large eaves encased the front porch, and two dormers adorned the second floor like the knobby warts of an old man's skull. To the side, a thick turret jutted out; it was visible all the way from Jagger's bedroom window across the fields. When he went to college, Jagger would learn that this style of house was called Queen Anne.

Carl, Jagger's best friend from Jericho Hill, proclaimed, "That thing looks like one of those Scooby-Doo houses." Jagger disagreed. Jagger liked architecture. He owned a book of pictures of the buildings of Frank Lloyd Wright, and his bedroom was lined with toy homes he had

pieced together from his imagination. Just as Jagger did not know about Queen Annes, he also had no inkling of Second Empire architecture in America, which was typified by the blocked roofs that begat the looming, dark manors of Saturday morning mysteries. But even without that information, Jagger could contrast between the old house and Second Empire.

Like layers of brick and mortar, purple and red supported night's roof. Jagger watched the forbidding house. For him, the old house had become a source of escalating attention. He thought it a very odd house.

The boy asked his mother at dinner, "What is wrong with the old house?"

Jagger's mom was an ashen-faced woman who dragged on her cigarettes. She worked and supported her son at a time when Southern women were still supposed to stay home and concoct fried-vegetable recipes. When there was no one else, the cigarettes ballasted her.

Since the old house probably had rotten floorboards, rusty nails, and lots of broken glass—a mother's worst nightmare—she tried to make it seem as dull as Hamburger Helper. "It's just a house. Nothing special."

"But there is something strange about it. Know what I mean?"

"Hmm," she said as she browned the meat, much more conscious of her son's words than she let on.

"The tops of the house."

"Spires?"

"Right. Spires. They tilt to the side, all in the same direction, as if something is pulling them."

Jagger's mother crushed her cigarette and took the opportunity to quell this subject. "Those spires are tilting because the old house is leaning, and probably ready to collapse. I don't want you anywhere near that house. It's dangerous."

"But, Mom—"

She raised her hand. "Sounds like somebody needs a little shut up medicine. Nowhere near that house, J, or I'll bust your butt. You understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I want your promise, Quentin Jagger Murray."

"Fine!" he yelled as he left the kitchenette. He hated his mother. Like every other parent, she lived to prohibit him from exploring or

having fun. He told himself that if Christopher Columbus had a mother, he probably never would have left Italy.

Jagger minded his mother, though, because he knew she meant business. Look at what she did to his father. So Jagger had to settle for dreaming about the Queen Anne and its mysterious attraction, which would have sufficed. In fact, Jagger may have shut the blinds forever on the old house save for the dead dog. But that was after Pop-Eye's convenience store.

Sam Houston Elementary was located down the Old Galveston Road, off of Belasco (turn at the old Deere combine). The walk was less than half an hour from Jericho Hill, so Jagger's mom let him walk with Carl to and from school. Jagger insisted they leave early so that they could avoid Big Mike, who liked to tease Jagger by saying he was "as gay as Mick." Carl and Jagger saved their lunch money to splurge at the convenience store on the way home.

The convenience store squatted on Belasco Road, caddy-corner to Pooh's hundred-nightmare woods. In the fall and winter when the trees dropped their leaves and the underbrush lost its foliage, the Queen Anne's front porch peeked out through rummels in the naked forest.

A few weeks after his mom's mandate, Jagger and Carl stopped at the convenience store on the walk home from school to buy chocolate bars and bottles of Dr Pepper. Carl and Jagger were the only customers. Out of the blue, Carl asked the mostly toothless, pop-eyed old man behind the counter about the old house. "That house is no good," the man said between mouthfuls of tobacco.

"No good, or evil?" Carl said with the glee of a child who has fallen in love with slasher movies. His bread and butter were *Night of the Living Dead* and *Last House on the Left*.

"What's wrong with you, kid? I said no good. I meant it. Nobody's lived in that house since anyone can remember, and that's a long time."

They were all three staring through the crack in the woods to the old house's front porch now.

"Somebody had to own it," Jagger added.

"Somebody owns the property, but nobody's lived in that house. The LaCarrs own the land. It was Merrill LaCarr who bought the land back before we entered the Union."

"Who are the LaCarrs?" Carl needed to know.

"The LaCarrs are evil. They was run out of town before I was born. They live in Maine now, but they still own half this town."

"What do you mean they were evil?" Carl persisted.

The old man eyed him with his one good eye and said, "Damn, kid. I mean evil. House is no good. People is evil. The LaCarrs, the way my daddy used to tell it, they was wicked, weird people. Demented. Built the wrong way, like the old fishing docks or that Leaning Tower in Italy. Kept to theyselves, always looked down they's crooked noses at everybody else in town. They owned the textile factory 'fore it burned down. They nevu attended church. Lots of decent folks—my daddy was one of them—believed they was devil worshipers. When some kids disappeared, them LaCarrs was chased out of town for good." He spit his wad of chew into the pot for effect.

"But the house of death remains," Carl said in awe.

The craggily-faced man returned to reading his gazette. He looked like a pigeon the way his head darted back and forth from article to article as he tried to read with his one good eye.

"Best stay away from that house," he said between air jabs. "Used to be a small cottage out there, but then it disappeared. Nobody knows where that old house come from. Nobody remembers it being built. There was a cottage. Then there was that house. Best leave that one alone."

Because of his mother, Jagger could want something so bad he could taste it and still stave off his desires. Carl, however, was less easily swayed. Since his mother worked double night shifts, Carl had fewer restrictions than Jagger, whose mom was always on him. Carl often plotted to sneak away and go explore the old house. Jagger did his best to "pay him no nevermind," as his Memaw used to say, but he found that ignoring his own curiosity was even harder.

Jagger's bed faced the window. Every morning when he woke early so that he could hide his sheets, the shadow of the wall stretched over the field. Jagger would change his underwear and gaze out his window to the old house until his mom came to wake him. And every night, he looked out into the twilight primeval and watched the house. It was there to wake him and there to put him to sleep. From his observations, he learned that no bird perched on the house's turret or its rooftop. Even the ugliest crows and turkey vultures avoided the Queen Anne. Jagger wondered if the birds just didn't see the building, but they did. He had watched them swing around to avoid the very air above the house.

Jagger thought about what his mother said about the dilapidated



house leaning, but his study invalidated her remarks. While the spindles and spires may have been pulled in one direction, all the windows and door frames seemed pulled in other directions—like gravitational forces were sucking the windows and doors to an unseen mass. There was no explanation for this wild architecture except to say that it was perhaps foreign, or, as in the mind of a young child who reads comic books, alien. What human hand would fashion the boards that way or carve the fearful frame so out of symmetry from the rest of the house?

On a day when Carl stayed home sick from school, Jagger asked Pop-Eye about the rigid angles.

“House wasn’t always like that. Used to be beautiful and classy. Now it jest looks.... It ain’t that it’s unused, and it ain’t that it’s old.”

“What is it, then?”

“It’s dying.”

Jagger, who enjoyed living in the smooth lines of Frank Lloyd Wright, had a simple explanation for a building’s lifecycle. If people lived in a house, it was alive. If they didn’t, then it was dead. But that wasn’t what Pop-Eye meant. There was something else to this aged house. Something Jagger could not capture with his toy bricks. He had tried three times to recreate the Queen Anne, but there was an organic asymmetry to the house that eluded his crude copies.

The Earth’s pimple was a terrier on the far side of the ditch. Like the house, nobody knew where the stray came from. Likely it wandered in from one of the surrounding farms. Jagger watched it decompose over several days. He wished he had a set of binoculars to see it better. When Carl came over to play, Carl caught Jagger staring out the window.

“Ah, ha! So you do think about it!” Carl exclaimed. “I knew it! That old house is creepy. I heard this woman was killed out there, with blood spewing everywhere. It was really gruesome. Do you hear voices at night? My cousin told me a banshee still haunts the place.”

“I do hear voices. But the house isn’t what I’m looking at,” Jagger said, but before he could explain, Carl had joined him at the window and added, “I wish I could watch the house. Our dumb old one-story can’t see over the wall, and even if it could, we don’t face the fields. We face the cattle ranch. My brother says when we’re older, we have to try something called ‘cow tipping.’”

Jagger pointed out the window. “Look.”

Carl stopped his logorrhea long enough to glance around the fields. “What?”

“By the ditch.”

Carl surveyed the area, then his eyes popped with frenzied surprise. “Cool! We gotta go check it out!”

“I don’t know. My mom said—”

“Oh, build a bridge and get over it! We’ll be back before your mom’s precious dinner.”

Getting to the dead dog was harder than initially expected. First of all, Jagger told his mom that he and Carl were going out bike-riding. She reminded her son to stay inside Jericho Hill, which he had no intention of doing. Then they drove to the far end of the subdivision, which was still being built. They could cross on the dirt roads back there and ride over the ditch, then circle back down the fields to the carcass.

The dog was little more than an ossified skeleton dappled with fur.

“How long has it been here?” Carl asked.

“Since Dallas.”

“Huh?”

“Mom kicked Dad out a couple of weeks ago. He was ‘trivializing.’ Now he’s living with Uncle Ambrose.”

“When will he be back?”

Jagger shrugged nonchalantly and they kneeled down to study the corpse. Its eyes had been pecked out, and the gums were pulled back, distending the terrier’s teeth into elongated and menacing daggers.

“I got an idea,” Carl said. “Let’s play autopsy.” Carl ran back into the fields. He returned with four sticks. Two small and two long.

“What are the small ones?” Jagger asked.

“Scalpels.” Carl’s eyes dazzled. “Alright, Dr. Murray, we are going to begin to examine the body, which was brought in around midnight—the witching hour—and we aren’t stopping till we have chopped this man into a thousand little pieces and dissected his heart. Mwa ha ha ha!”

Jagger grinned. Carl was weird, but funny.

Carl handed Jagger a small stick. Carl then lifted his paisley button-down over his nose. Jagger also donned an imaginary surgical mask.

“I will now make the first incision into the body’s third metacarpal phalange.”

Carl slowly jabbed the dog’s body with the small stick, adding

pressure until the dog's skin pinched its ribs. Though they should have heard a growing susurrant, they were too involved in the autopsy to heed it.

Finally, the skin split open like dried paper. Carl smiled at Jagger, and they both looked greedily inside. A mass squirmed around inside the dog's guts. Carl hoped it was maggots. It wasn't.

"Run!" Carl shrieked.

They both scrambled back away from the ditch and raced across the field as a swarm of yellowjackets rose out of the carcass like a phantom and pursued them. They flung their hands over their heads and ran like a Deere, as his Memaw liked to say. About half-way across the field, the jackets gave up the chase and returned to their feast. Bursting with adrenaline, though, the boys continued their retreat all the way to the tree line before they stopped.

"Did you get bit?" Carl asked.

Jagger looked himself over, checking his arms and chest. "No. You?"

"Nope. Look."

There it loomed in all its foreboding, forbidden pleasure. The place that Jagger had wanted to visit since they moved out to Jericho Hill. The old house. It roosted in a nest of unswept leaves. A broken, fenceless gate stood between them and the house. An awful putrescence stifled the air.

"Did you crunch a grumpy?" Carl laughed as he coughed. "That is gross." The stench was as bad as the two o'clock fart from the kid at school who always ate Mexican pizza. Jagger didn't answer.

"Last House on the Left," Carl said, and they both pushed through the broken gate.

"Do you think anyone lives here anymore?" Carl asked.

"The old guy at the convenience store said it was abandoned. Why would anyone build a house like this, and not add a driveway? If you can afford this house, surely you can afford a car. Even my mom owns a station wagon."

Carl rolled his eyes. "Let's throw rocks through the windows. Maybe we can rouse that old banshee." Carl fondled a few stones that failed to satisfy him. "This first rock has to be special." Suddenly, he found what he was looking for. With great ceremony, he showed Jagger a piece of sandstone slightly larger than his fist.

Carl chose a vast side window, then stared it down like he was Nolan Ryan. After giving it a good once-over, Carl leaned back and

shot the rock like it was a lead ball booming from a cannon. He focused all his tee-ball and Little League experience into guiding that rock straight to the tall window. It was a good pitch to the strike zone, but rather than smash the window into a hundred shards, the rock thunked against the pane, leaving little more than a smirch of dust.

The two boys looked at each other. Rocks weren't supposed to thunk against windows. Where was the satisfying crash? The damage? The fulfilling vandalism?

"That's weird."

Jagger was infatuated. "Let's go look inside," he said. He wanted to explore every square foot of this strange building's floor plan. He wanted to climb into the turret and look back over the distance they had come and watch his house. He wondered what other secrets it guarded.

Jagger never realized how much fun disobedience could be. On the one hand, he questioned what would happen if his mother went looking for him, or if somebody spotted him and Carl and told his mom. He would be so deep in trouble, his butt would never stop hurting after all the shut up medicine he received. But to finally be here at the Queen Anne empowered him. He owned his parents.

They jumped up on the porch and dashed past the latticework to the front door. The porch reverberated densely.

Jagger said, "Hey, listen." He stomped on the wooden floorboards. Instead of a wooden clap, the stomping made a muffled pounding similar to striking a hollow pipe. Carl followed suit. This was fun.

Carl tried the doorknob. It was locked. Carl tried again.

While Carl attempted to jimmy the lock, Jagger looked up at the frieze bordering the eaves. He remembered reading that the friezes of the Greek Parthenon displayed images of Athena's conquests. But the Queen Anne's friezes offered dark and barbed runes that he had never seen before. Alongside the runes, ugly friezes depicted blasphemous abominations of animals like hunching, simian figures with bulbous, tusked heads and a walleyed spider-man wearing a casque of alien skulls. The last glyph stood out as if in relief to the others. Its large, circular head, globular eye, and three arms spiraled counter-clockwise. The overt maliciousness of the glyphs splashed Jagger's spine with fear. A twig broke in the distance. It sounded like a candle falling or doors locking. Jagger wheeled around, certain to see his mother holding his father's belt up in the air, or something worse. But the only movement was the percussion of leaves in the air.



Carl tried the door again. Jagger grabbed his wrist. "Maybe we should go," Jagger warned.

"Why?"

"Don't you feel that?"

"What?"

"Like somebody's watching us."

"Don't turn chickenshit on me."

"I'm being serious."

"Dammit, So am I, J." Carl glanced furtively around the house. His voice lowered and he spoke to Jagger in a wave of maturity he would never again reproduce. "Everybody's made up of emotions. It's the concrete in us. Anger. Sadness. Joy. But with you it's fear. You gotta stop being afraid or you're going to find you have a life built on fear. C'mon. I think I saw a cellar door in the back. We can still get in."

Towards the back Carl ran, leaving Jagger alone with the Queen Anne. Jagger told himself he was not built on fear. To hell with fear. He was Mean Joe Green. Jagger looked in the mullioned window. In his mind's eye, a blue wraith with long, bony fingers stared at him from behind the curtain. But none of the windows had curtains. They were solid windowpanes, and they reflected like mirrors; he could not see through them. Jagger wiped the dust off the window and cupped his hands around his face to reduce glare. He expected the wraith to slam a fist through the window and grab him, but he couldn't see anything. Not even a room.

Turning around, he saw a group of crows picking at an object in the brush. Jagger walked over to the crows. They scattered as he approached, but one crow grabbed the thing in its beak and flew to a higher branch. A child's tennis shoe the bird held in its beak. As the crow pulled itself into the air, it dropped the shoe.

Carl knelt down on the ground. The crows' attention had beaten up the shoe. Why this shoe attracted the crows goaded his curiosity. He knew crows scavenged for strings and ribbons and shoelaces for their nests, but an entire shoe? It made no sense. He picked it up.

First, the small red stains like spray paint caught his attention. Second, the jagged shard of tibia in the center of a meat pie. The reaction was immediate and uncontrollable. As the shoe dropped from his hand, he felt the mudslide crashing down his pants.

He was sweating and wet. Nothing looked close to TP. He had to get out of there. The sensation of being watched still hammered nails of fear into his spinal column, and he did not want to wait to find out

what happened to the body that had been attached to the foot in the shoe. He wondered where Carl went. He remembered him saying something about the back of the house, but Jagger's mind felt clouded and cottony. His thoughts were caught in a traffic jam in his brain. He shuffled away from the underbrush and stumbled back towards the old house.

"What happened to you?" Carl demanded. "You look like you saw a ghost. Did you see the banshee?"

"We gotta get out of here," Jagger mumbled.

"Are you crazy? I think I found a way in. Look. The cellar."

Carl turned his back on Jagger and made for the wide cellar doors. The sharply angled windows blinked. Carl did not see it. From underneath those strange lids opened two cold and refulgent eyes like an angler fish. At first, Jagger thought this was the result of his imagination slamming into the pile-up in his head. If that was true, though, then what were the jaws for? Jagger grabbed Carl as the cellar doors revealed two sharp pedipalps that lunged at him.

The two children fell backward onto the ground. In the trees, crows scattered as if frightened by buckshot. The dead house became suddenly and viciously alive. Boards snapped and split. Sections of the wall, once covered in ivy, burst from the house as the Queen Anne exuded fat, warty tentacles. The turret ripped out from the house like a scaly tail. More eyes slit from the walls and a thorax bellowed from the roof. The transformation was instantaneous. Where one breath ago stood an aged and dejected Queen Anne now stood a Sardakian Chimera.

Jagger shrieked. He jumped backward, pulling Carl. First one gray, gossamer-covered tentacle slammed down at Jagger's side, then another. The mishapen face fell down on the two boys, but they outran the twelve-legged creature. By the time they turned around, they were almost to Belasco Road. The Sardakian clucked its taloned chelicera balefully at them, then it pulled its wart-infested body back under the shell of the Queen Anne. As the ancient dust settled around the house, the creeping chaos groaned, and the last malignant tentacle recoiled under the floorboards. Only an old Queen Anne that the crows would not settle on remained.

They swore to never tell anyone what they discovered at the old house.

Carl's mom met a guy, and they moved in with him a few months

later. Jagger's parents reconciled, and they all left to Dallas. But until then, every morning when Jagger woke to change the sheets, he would look out at the Queen Anne across the fields with dread. The first morning after the demon attack, immediately he could tell that something was different. The Queen Anne was in the same place, but it was a little closer to Jericho Hill and Jagger's window.

Jagger moved away, grew up, and became the architect he dreamed of when he was a boy from Jericho Hill. His life was still full of complications, though. His parents eventually divorced. Carl, deeply affected by the Queen Anne, deteriorated socially. He augered for years until he ended up in Huntsville. Burglary of a habitation/armed robbery. One shank later and he was 99-to-life.

Then one morning Jagger woke up and realized he had wet his bed. At his age, he should have seen a doctor immediately, but he knew his problem was not an infection. The Queen Anne had been pulling at him for the past month. She felt like a dark current tugging at the bottom of his quintessence.

The creator of the "Transformative Gothic" architectural style took a road trip. Jagger had to return to the place that made him the person he was. His lodestone. His lynchpin. Of all the times in his life, of all the places he had lived, Jericho Hill and the Queen Anne inspired him the most. But Jericho Hill had changed. Like the Queen Anne when he was a boy, Jericho Hill had passed into old age and now showed signs of decline. Some of the houses looked unused and deteriorating.

The old widow welcomed him in when he explained his history with the townhouse and that he just wanted to look around. His bedroom was now a sewing room. The border of cars had changed to a paisley design, but the same glass-pane window remained. Jagger looked through it. Nothing had ever been built on the fields. They were still just as ugly and yellowed as he remembered them. But the Queen Anne was gone. Something small and gleaming shined out there in the distance amongst the willows.

"Did they finally bulldoze that old Queen Anne house that used to be out in the field?" Jagger asked the widow.

"You didn't hear?"

"Don't live around here any more."

"That's right. Well, it was quite the tale here. Became part of town gospel overnight. That old house had been there so long, and it was an eyesore. Nobody liked it. We all knew it was wrong. No driveway. Did

you ever notice how the birds won't land on it? I wouldn't have believed it myself if I hadn't watched that old house from this very room. It gave me the jitters, that house. Well, one night a dreadful noise came from the woods over yonder. It woke me up, and half the town, too. It sounded horrible. Just horrible. Worse than an injured dog, but not as human as a rabbit when you grab it by the ears. Then there was this smell. Disgusting. Like the sewage main had ruptured. I came up here to see 'cause I knew it was the house. Huge columns of fire, like the ones God sent to slay Pharaoh's army, arched out of that house. The wind was blowing to Jericho Hill all that smoke, which must have brought the wretched stench. It was nauseating. I called the Fire Department, but there was nothing anyone would do. We all wanted it gone. Wearing their gas masks, they dug some trenches to keep the fire from spreading. Then they let it burn itself out."

Jagger was looking out the window as the old widow recalled her story. When she stopped, he looked back at her; her mouth trembled. She looked like she wanted—needed—to say more, if only he would ask.

When he did, she said, "I shouldn't say. People'd say I'm a crazy old biddy."

"I lived here. I slept in this bedroom. I saw things."

Her face lit up. Wrinkles spread like the contours of thin sheets over her face. "So did I. You ever hear about the LaCarrs?"

"Chased out of town. Some people thought they were Devil worshippers."

"Not exactly. My mother was an attendant for them. They were very strange people. Kept odd hours and stopped talking whenever she entered the room. She did not last long there. But once she found a trap door. It led through a long tunnel that wound under their homestead and opened into an open field behind a small hillock. There was a pentagram burned into the ground. She told me that each point of the pentagram was marked with a planet. She recognized Saturn and Jupiter, but the others were beyond her limited education. She never told anyone else about her discovery, or of the books she found in the LaCarr study. This happened before the Murrys led the revolt against the LaCarrs. The books were left out by accident. One was a star map, but the names of the stars were all different. She knew little about Astronomy, but her mom had taught her the North Star, and she knew her constellations. In the LaCarr book, these stars had obscene names and sadistic constellations. She put the book away, and she almost left



the room. Snooping around would get her into trouble. Maybe the kind of trouble people don't survive."

She looked out the window at the bare spot. "Houses without driveways is like people without relationships. You got to wonder how they got that way."

Jagger nodded and added, "And I think that there is one less in the world now."

Jagger thanked her for the conversation, but before he left, Jagger made a connection to something the old widow had told him.

"You know, it's funny. You said the Murrys chased the LaCarrs out of town."

"Yes. There was bad blood between the Murrys and LaCarrs. I don't recall that anybody knows where or why the feud started."

"My name is Murray. Quentin Jagger Murray. Just thought it was an interesting coincidence."

"Not unless your grandma was Uncle Sam Murray." Jagger chuckled. "I heard they called Memaw that because she tried to join the army during World War II."

But rather than smiling or sharing a laugh, the old widow stared at Jagger with pale trepidation. She grabbed his arm (her ice-cold fingers clawed him like raptor's talons) and handed him his coat.

"You must leave, Mr. Murray. You do not know the evil that surrounds you here. You are fortunate enough to have escaped here once, but the Queen Anne is not the only hunter in the shadows. Not the only remnant that would love to dine on a Murray."

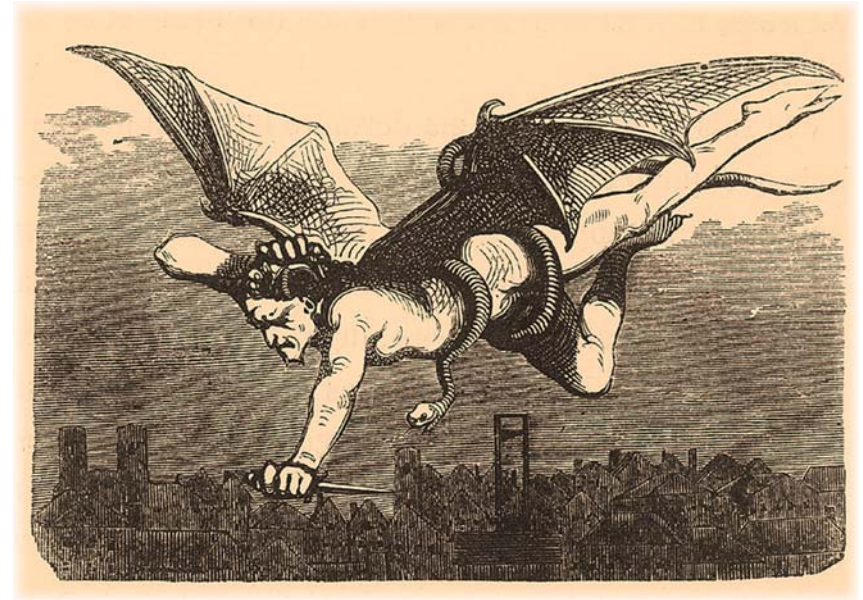
Concern covered his face like a caul, but he shook it off. "Maybe a long time ago, but these things die out. My parents never mentioned the LaCarrs or family feuds."

"Just because the Murrys have buried the hatchet don't mean the LaCarrs' shades have forgotten, that they don't have an axe to grind. You're a good person. I can tell. And you have many great things in your life. But mister, if you don't leave, you will always be looking over your shoulder and wondering what stalks you from outside your line of sight. People, like houses, can't be built on a foundation of fear. Leave Jericho Hill, Mr. Murray."

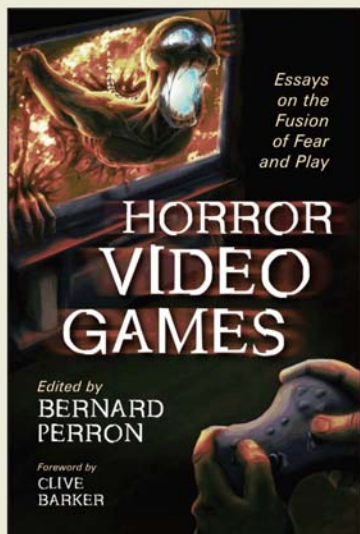
"Running from fears is no way to live your life, either, ma'am." Jagger took his coat and got into his SUV. He did not pretend to look for something out in the fields. Not this time. He drove to the side of Belasco Road where he and Carl had escaped the Queen Anne so long ago. Something lingered amongst the willows. Jagger went to the edge

of the small woods. The ground was blackened in ash and soot. Where the Queen Anne once sat and waited, several large support beams and rafters arched out of the burned ground where no life would ever grow again. To the casual observer, these sturdy columns looked like the remains of a burned-down house. Jagger knew better. They were as white as the ribs of the dead dog whose carcass was devoured by the Earth, only this skeleton was from an alien. He walked down the length of the house as the ribs narrowed. He stuck his hands in the dirt and ash and sifted through the debris until he uncovered the top of a giant skull permeated with eye sockets. He dropped the skull and fell backwards. Tried to catch his breath. Then the dreaded sensation of being watched overcame him, as if he was ten years old again and being stalked by an alien predator. Jagger looked around. Not twenty yards from him, hidden in the trees, was a brand-new, pristine shed. Jagger ran from the shed and never looked back.

The world was a much darker place, and the words of the widow flowed through his mind. That there were other monstrosities in the night, creatures from some hellish world who still had an axe to grind. The shadows were longer, the night darker. And the world was full of houses without driveways. ●



# Seriously Weird Knowledge



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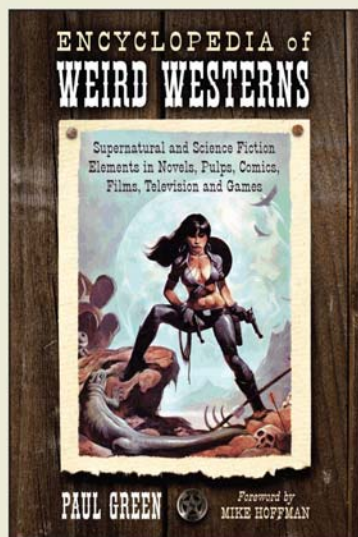
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## THE PATIENCE ROSE

Anne M. Pillsworth

AS THE TOUR VAN LABORED UP THE ROAD OUT OF KINGSPORT, HARLEY Mittelman watched the ocean loll against sun-struck cliffs. He was sweating in the rear seat, by a window that didn't open. Where did New England get off calling itself civilized when half its buildings and vehicles lacked air conditioning? For two weeks, he'd been annoying Tricia with that observation, but any amusement was long dead. New Hampshire and Maine had been as hot as Houston; today, Massachusetts was actually hotter. They might as well have stayed home.

"The cliff with the aquiline profile is called King Neptune," said Nathaniel Horrocke, proprietor of Haunted Coastline Tours. "Beyond is Kingsport Head, atop which you can see the High House, built prior to 1650. It's inaccessible except to skilled climbers, which is fortunate—under certain circumstances, the High House is said to offer a gateway into faery."

"Fairy what?" asked the old woman in front of Mittelman.

She wasn't joking.

Sick of her sunflower-decked hat and stale cologne, he slid to the opposite side of the van. Ocean gave way to an aerial view of Kingsport, all jumbled streets and rusty steeples. Somewhere down there, Tricia was driving their rented Volvo to every antique shop in town. By the end of the day, she'd put another ten thousand on her credit cards, minimum. Since his last promotion at the bank, Mittelman didn't care about the money. What depressed him was Tricia's unerring ability to choose the most ostentatious furniture available. Soon the relics would arrive at their pseudo-neo-Colonial, dead history to deck out fake history. At least he'd drummed it into her head that any marble cherubs flitting off the truck would be flitting right back on. The house was hers to clutter. The garden was his territory.

And the real hell of this vacation was, after all his boasting at the garden club, he wouldn't be bringing home his own truckload of rediscovered Yankee roses.



Tricia had manipulated him shamelessly. Think of all the beautiful gardens in New England, and the graveyards, going back to colonial days! But Mittelman had hardly *seen* an old rose, much less rediscovered one. Yankees either left their graves to grass or planted them with yews and pachysandra. Roses wandered into their cemeteries only after perpetual care wandered out, waste ground colonizers like wild rugosas and the ubiquitous multiflora. In one graveyard near Stonington, he'd spotted bushes whose flat pink blooms had promised much, and he'd run over with renewed faith in his destiny. But the damn things had been Betty Priors, crass driveway floribundas, installed so recently their plastic tags hadn't faded.

So he hadn't expected much from this tour, though its brochure listed boneyards out the butt. Sure enough, the in-town cemeteries had been barren of roses, and the garden of the Kingsport Historical Society had dealt his hopes the final blow. Its sign boasted that all its plants were authentic to the colonial era, but the only roses were on the entrance archway, and they were Icebergs, introduced in 1968.

He should have gone shopping with Tricia and napped in the air-conditioned Volvo. Instead he'd sentenced himself to stumbling over cobblestones with five other victims of tourism. Every pre-Revolutionary house in Kingsport seemed to have sheltered witches, and Haunted Coastline Tours had hit them all, plus the Congregational Church where nameless rites had been practiced, plus the front lawn of some crazy sea captain, where stone idols leered under twisted pines.

Mittelman would have demanded his money back if he hadn't felt sorry for Nathaniel Horrocke. He was a gaunt guy who also ran the bookstore where the tour started. He looked Mittelman's age, forty, forty-five, but he dressed like a superannuated professor: threadbare tweed jacket, white shirt, narrow tie pierced with a Cyclops-eyed star. Maybe the tie tack was the emblem of some academic society—Horrocke talked like he was used to lecture halls, and to students uninterested in the lectures. He reminded Mittelman of Jack Corey, who'd taught him creative writing at college and written gorgeous and largely ignored poetry in a rundown apartment on the campus edge. Tricia's nagging had helped, but it was really Corey's not so genteel poverty that had convinced Mittelman to switch majors from English to Finance.

He glimpsed Horrocke in the rearview mirror, which confirmed his impression: Horrocke had Corey's weary look of royalty deposed

before it reached the throne. And with every spook story he told, he dropped the name of a book that went deeper into the matter and that could be purchased, natch, at Horrocke's Bookstore. Hell of a way to make a living.

The van bumped into a dirt pull-off. Mittelman looked out the window at tall grass, leaning tombstones and Rosa multiflora. He hoisted himself with a groan and followed Mrs. Sunflowers off the van.

"This is the Orange Point Burial Ground," Horrocke said. "It was established for victims of a plague that struck Kingsport in 1692. Typhoid, historians claim. However, contemporary records ascribe the disease to witchcraft. This way, please."

*This way* led across the road to a lawn overlooking ocean and city. Mittelman supposed he should photograph the panorama, but he'd done his duty by Tricia's vacation album at the start of the tour, when he'd asked Mrs. Sunflowers to snap him in front of the Gothic-lettered van. He let the others do the shutter-clicking while he leaned against one of the three granite blocks jutting from the center of the lawn.

Horrocke took up his narration again: "These blocks were the bases of gibbets on which fifteen people were hanged during the witch-panic of 1692. The plaque on the middle block is modern. It lists the names of the hanged and deplores the superstitions of their day. It's interesting, however, that after the executions, the plague stopped and never recurred."

The woman who'd been making gravestone rubbings all day flapped her portfolio against Mittelman's block. "How many of the fifteen were female?"

"Twelve."

"Big surprise. They buried across the road?"

"No, Ms. Ackerly. That ground is consecrated. Witches couldn't be buried there."

"Any nearby?"

"Yes. In fact, the grave of one of the witches is our last stop today."

Mittelman closed his eyes. The gibbet-base felt pleasantly cool against his buttocks, no doubt due to the unfading chill of its original purpose. He gave a chuckle.

If Horrocke heard, he didn't miss a beat: "That grave belongs to Patience Orne. She was an herbalist and healer, but her father discovered that she often left the house at night, and he followed her on one of her excursions. She went to the home of a man who'd been courting her, and she crept through his open window. Her father looked

in and saw her sucking blood from the sleeping man's wrist. The next day, he denounced Patience. Her suitor pleaded for her in vain. After her execution, he planted a rose from her garden on her grave, where it still grows."

Mittelman opened his eyes.

Horrocke was looking directly at him. "The rose bloomed red in Patience's garden," he said. "But on her grave, it blooms white, paled by grief."

He would not get excited. This Patience had died hundreds of years ago. Any rose planted on her newly dug grave would be long gone. But maybe the original rose had self-propagated. "We're going there?" he asked, nonchalant.

"This way, Mr. Mittelman."

Horrocke walked to the edge of the lawn, where a narrow path ran off into briars and scrub blueberries. Mrs. Sunflower and her husband chose to stay behind. So did the young couple. That left Horrocke, Mittelman, and Ms. Ackerly, who marched along with her portfolio on her head. Mittelman gave her credit for stamina. It was all he could do to shove through the brush, head roasting in the sun, twigs snatching at his sneaker laces. Horrocke in his ridiculous suit drifted well ahead. "Not much further," he called back.

The smell of the rose reached Mittelman before he saw it, a perfume compounded of attar and peaches. He thrust into a clearing at the edge of the cliff. Horrocke and Ms. Ackerly were there before him. They were irrelevant. The great, the glorious thing was the rose.

It was huge, six feet tall with arching canes that took up half the clearing, and it was not a multiflora, not a rugosa, not anything he had seen before. Its pure white, fully double blooms looked a little like an Alba Maxima. Was it that? He walked closer, breathing in the sweetness that had drawn swarms of bees. The leaves were rounded and grayish-green like an Alba's, but the thorns were wrong. Far from bearing innocuous Alba prickles, these canes bristled with crimson hooks like a Sweetbriar's, only longer. He cupped a bloom and pressed open the center with his thumb. The stamens and anthers were also crimson, which was atypical of either Albas or Sweetbriars. Maybe it was an early hybrid, so long lost it was new, the Patience Rose, that was what he could call it—

A yell erupted from the bush. Mittelman jerked back, as if he'd caused the outcry by prodding the flower's innards, but the problem was Ms. Ackerly. She'd crawled under the rose, and two canes had

twitched together and snagged the collar of her polo shirt. Horrocke had already gone to the rescue. Mittelman joined him. Together they eased the canes away, and the woman scooted back. She had scratches on both sides of her neck. "What a monster!" she said, dabbing trickles of blood.

Horrocke gave her a handkerchief. "I'm very sorry. I should have warned you about the thorns. This rose can certainly grow. I cut it back from the headstone just last month."

Mittelman circled the bush and found a place where the canes left a two-foot gap between their ends and the ground. "I think I could get in under here."

"Well, see if there really is a stone," Ms. Ackerly said.

Mittelman insinuated himself into the fortress of the rose. Once past the outermost canes, he knelt in a blissfully shady cave. Its ceiling of matted foliage was high enough for him to sit, and its floor was carpeted with moss. The stone stood to his left, near the base of the bush, gnarled gray canes intertwined to make a mock trunk, with young green canes shooting up around them. There was no trace of grafting. This baby was on its own roots, and it was old -- hell, maybe the original *could* have been planted three hundred years before.

In lieu of shouting, Mittelman punched the mossy ground with one fist.

"Mr. Mittelman? Are you all right?"

Horrocke. "Fine," Mittelman said. The steadiness of his own voice gratified him, considering how close to bursting he felt.

"How's the stone?" Ms. Ackerly called in.

Mittelman peered at it. It was a small slab that looked like someone had taken a sledgehammer to it—the curved top was deeply chipped, and layers of slate had flaked away from the engraved surface. Beneath the worst flaking, he could make out *Patience Orne*, but several lines beneath the name were too faint to read. He made his report, then turned his face to the ceiling overhead. Pinpoints of sun pierced it here and there; the bees droned, a sleepy sound. He inhaled the perfume of the bush, attar and peaches and an elusive something more.

Outside Horrocke was lecturing again: "The headstone was vandalized long ago. It's said to have borne the representation of a lamb carrying a cross. The inscription read: 'Patience Orne, daughter of Deliverance and Priscilla of this town, hanged for her salvation in the year of our Lord sixteen hundred and ninety-two. Let her sleep.'"

"Did she have any choice?" Ms. Ackerly sniped. "But if the thing's such a mess, I'll pass on a rubbing."

"Mr. Mittelman?"

Reluctantly he crawled out and turned from the rose, turned as if it meant nothing to him. Once Horrocke and Ms. Ackerly were well down the path, he hurried back and snapped photos, one of the whole bush, one of a bloom, close up. Then he cut the bloom with his pocketknife and slipped it into his breast pocket. He hadn't the time or gear for more, now. Ms. Ackerly's portfolio bobbed over the scrub blueberries, almost out of sight. Mittelman scrambled after it.

Under the cover of the brush, he eased out his specimen and gazed into its ruffled heart. The innermost petals had a faint tinge of pink that deepened toward their bases, where they met the crimson stamens. Beautiful, and later, when he came back with his collecting gear, the Patience Rose would be his, Harley Mittelman's, with all the added romance of bearing a witch's name.

He grinned fit to split his face.

When she picked him up at Horrocke's Bookstore, Tricia raved about a highboy she'd found. He had to come write a check—the shop owner didn't take credit cards. After that, she insisted on dinner at the Market House. Only when she was wallowing in the clawfoot bathtub at their inn could Mittelman escape.

He told her he was going for a walk to settle his stomach, not wanting to share his discovery with her and hear her indulgent but contemptuous laugh. Then he eased the soft-sided cooler from his suitcase and checked its contents: flashlight, plastic bags, gloves, clippers, a sturdy hand shovel. How about ice? Their inn was too quaint to have dispensers in the halls, but a stop at the bar netted him plenty. He filled the bottom of the cooler, put a thick layer of newspaper over the ice, and he was ready to go.

By the time he made Orange Point, the sun was below the horizon. No problem. His flashlight was strong, and a fullish moon was rising. He parked the Volvo in the dirt pull-off under the graveyard and hurried across to the gibbet-lawn.

The path to the rose clearing, he walked easily this time, as if the briars and blueberries drew aside out of respect for his quest. The notion made him snort, but it pleased him too, for it came from a younger Mittelman, one without a vice-presidency and a pseudo-neo-Colonial and a wife lost in pretension. A quickening breeze carried the

scent of his rose to him, and the scent dispelled the mosquitoes that had been hovering around his head. So it had that much power? Why not? *A rose is sensation raw, beauty naked, no apologies, amoral.*

Jesus, had he really written that? Yes, and published it in the college literary mag, after kicking ass to keep the weepy art editor from plastering a greeting card picture of long stems over his poem.

The cliffside clearing opened in front of him. In it, the Patience Rose burned white, laden with the glowing cups of its bloom. He stopped, still, breathing. Attar and peaches, and the other component of its perfume was stronger now, a little acrid, a little musky.

*Beauty naked—*

*When I have drunk you, we'll go naked in the woods, we'll care for none of them.*

Mittelman couldn't remember that line. It was nice, though, like a young woman reassuring her lover in the night. If Tricia was asleep when he got back, he'd jot it down and see if anything else came. It was a long time since he'd written a poem. But right now he had a job to do.

He spent half an hour taking softwood cuttings from the rose and tucking them into plastic bags. Back home in Houston, he'd plant the cuttings in peat moss and sand and tough out the couple months it might take for them to put out roots. What if none survived? It wasn't likely, but the cuttings had a long way to travel, and he was taking them in damn hot weather, which discouraged good rooting.

He'd better maximize his chances now—who knew when he could come back to Kingsport? Mittelman layered his cuttings in the cooler and zipped it shut. He shoved plastic bags and clippers in his jean pockets. Flashlight and hand shovel he carried to the raised portcullis of the fortress of the rose.

Safe inside, he positioned the flash to shine on the base of the rose. He'd dig some new green shoots, getting as much of the root system as possible. Shredded newspaper, dampened and packed around the roots, would keep the shoots viable until he could pot them up.

He scraped away inch-thick moss and dug, carefully, gently. Underneath the rose, in the humid night air, its fragrance was overpowering, and the smell of turned earth rose to meet it. How soft and black the soil was, weirdly rich for waste ground. Crumbling a clod under his nose, Mittelman picked out an animal tang that struck a chord in his memory. Worm castings? Bone meal? No, blood meal. Was someone feeding his rose? Did someone else know how valuable it was?

Crazy, paranoia. You had to dig blood meal in, and the ground under the rose hadn't been disturbed for years. Even so, he crawled around, making sure. Everywhere his gloved hands sank into cushiony moss. It was all right, he was the only one—

His head struck the slate headstone. He rocked back, rubbing his crown and glaring at the slab.

*We're alone, no meddlers near.*

Gooseflesh stirred the hair on his arms. Given his surroundings, just knocked home to him, he'd thank the Muse whispering him poetry to keep it to herself until he was back in Kingsport. Mittelman returned to his digging and dug faster. It was funny how he hadn't thought of it before, how he was delving into a grave mound. What if cops saw his car and came snooping? Hey, Officer, he was no ghoul, just rooting for roots.

And he'd rooted deep enough. Mittelman pulled off his right glove and worked his fingers into the loosened soil. The earth was still warm a foot beneath the surface. That was damn strange. Would it still be warm six feet down?

"Can it," he muttered. He had a good handful of roots, and he braced himself to lever them out. Then a hand wormed up from deeper underground and closed around his wrist, unmistakable, fingers slender but strong, nails long.

Mittelman tore his hand out of the grasping earth. His heart thundered in his throat, blocking his scream. Scratches scored his wrist, oozing. He knelt on a witch's grave, a witch who had drunk blood, and there was a scrabbling in the hole he'd dug. He flailed for his flashlight. He knocked it away, under thorn-mailed canes. To hell with it. All he had to do was get out from under the rose. He pivoted from the hole to the gap in the canes, which wasn't there. Leaves hissed, canes scraped together. The gap was gone, the portcullis fallen.

Couldn't be—in the uncertain light, he was confused. He wheeled on his knees, three hundred and sixty degrees. There was no gap, just solid canes to the ground.

Something waved from his hole.

Mittelman charged the place where he remembered the gap to have been. Thorns sank into his ungloved hand and mauled his bare forearms. He couldn't thrust a way through the canes—they writhed into a tighter mesh the more he struggled. He attacked with his clippers, but the wood of the canes was unnaturally tough, and he hacked to little effect, barely lacerating them. One whipped inward, scored his

cheek, drove him back. He flung aside the useless clippers. What if he prayed? What *would* he pray? Would Horrocke know, or one of his books?

It was too late to make that purchase.

He got out his scream and reared up, battling the ceiling of the trap. The canes here, tiger-clawed, shredded his scalp and skin, yielding one inch to regain two. Perfume suffocated him, attar and peaches and the fugitive subscent he recognized now that he smelled it on himself, iron, hot, blood. He fell back to hands and knees. Was he beat, would he have to look at the thing he had roused out of the ground? His flashlight still burned, and in its defused light, he looked at anything else, watched moss smear red under his ungloved hand, studied the battered headstone inches from his face. Once it had borne the engraving of a lamb with a cross. Horrocke had made a point of saying so, but the damn bastard hadn't said enough. To hell with the lamb, it was the *cross* that had been important, so important that someone had come and hammered it off the stone. Who, Patience's Puritan lover, wanting her back? Why? Had her love been so much sweeter than the love of living women?

*Look, lie quiet, find out for yourself.*

He looked. That much he had to do.

A woman's hand, sculpted from twisted black roots, had grown out of his hole. Mittelman swallowed air for another scream, but he didn't scream, he watched with mouth gaping while the root-hand cloaked itself in skin as white as the roses overhead and nails as delicately pink as their innermost petals. The fingers flexed open, blooming.

Canes descended onto his back. They pressed him down. Now that he had stopped fighting, now that he didn't start again, there was no laceration, no pain. The moss molded itself to him like the breasts and belly of a lover, one he'd never known, one lush and vigorous.

*Sensation raw, beauty naked, no apologies*

The hand from the hole clasped his ungloved wrist, warm as the earth he'd dug. Another sprouted and evolved from vegetable to flesh. It caressed the back of his neck, urging his face to the moss as it swelled into the face of a girl with petal-pale lips and curved-thorn teeth that would prick him tenderly, he knew.

*Hanged for her salvation.*

Wrong, so wrong. *Hanged for his.*

The Texan had taken pictures on the day of his disappearance. One



showed him in front of the Haunted Coastlines van, and so the police had come to Horrocke.

He remembered Mittelman as a fate-marked man, but he didn't tell the police that. Instead he followed them to Orange Point, where Mittelman's rental car had been found and where he'd snapped photos of a rose bush. While the police poked and pried, Horrocke stood on the edge of the cliff and gazed down at the surf. Something yellow floated among the rocks. It looked like one of those new soft-sided coolers.

"This Mittelman was big on gardening," the police lieutenant said, coming out from under the rose on Patience Orne's grave. Horrocke had already looked there and seen that the mossy ground was undisturbed, as it had been undisturbed for centuries. "Did he talk to you about that?"

"No," Horrocke said. "He really said very little, Lieutenant." But from the way the Texan's eyes had worshiped the rose, Horrocke had known. Mittelman had been a digger in the earth. By now, he had gone entirely into it, like a great mandrake root. Let him sleep happy there, as doubtless he did, as Patience replete would sleep this bright day.

He called the lieutenant over and pointed out the floating cooler. One of the other policeman joined them, holding photos. "This can't be the place you showed Mittelman," he said to Horrocke.

"Why do you say that, Officer?"

"The bush in his pictures is white."

Horrocke turned to the sprawling rose, with its burden of crimson flowers. "The rose was originally red," he said, lapsing, to his own amusement, into tour guide intonation. "And sometimes, as you see, it reverts." ●



## JACASSER'S GOLD

Lawrence Barker

EMILE JACASSER COULD NO LONGER LIE TO HIMSELF. HIS NAILS DUG ravines in the gritty dirt and candlefish grease on his palms. His snow-bound cabin might contain weeks worth of dried salmon. It might contain enough sea-otter pelts to keep him warm, should he run out of wood. But, he now admitted, staying meant some fisherman or Tlingit Indian would find his frozen corpse next spring. If he ventured into the blizzard, he would perish before reaching the shore of Douglas Island, where his cabin stood. Even if he somehow survived, cold and choppy Gastineau Channel separated him from the Juneau mining camp. What to do?

As if in response to his silent musings, something enormous rammed his cabin door. It gave off an ocean and earth reek that penetrated the scent of Jacasser's own unwashed body. The door's protruding three inch nails discouraged bears, but not the unseen attacker. Not only that, but its motion made the earth beneath his feet tremble with the 'doom, doom' of Indian drums.

Thoughts of the Tlingits' legendary monsters—the man-otters that drowned the unwary, the giants that so longed for blood that their dead bodies disgorged mosquitoes, the towering, large-footed hairy man of the forest—flashed through his head. Disgusted with himself for letting superstition roil his mind, Jacasser spat on the packed earth floor. He reached for his .50 caliber Hawken rifle. Unlike the insubstantial phantoms of Tlingit tales, whatever was outside was as real as the four egg-sized gold nuggets he had, before the storm, discovered on the rocky beach. He would fight if necessary.

The massive door gave a fraction of an inch. Jacasser pointed the rifle. "Do your worst!" Jacasser snarled in his accented English. "If I die, I die happy," he whispered in soft French, casting his eyes toward the seal-skin bag that contained his treasure. Then he waited.

After a few moments of listening to the pounding at the door and his own throbbing heartbeat, silence descended. Jacasser nervously

glanced at the shuttered window. Spiked or not, the shutter was weaker than the heavy door. Might something that battered the door so burst through the window?

A polite knock sounded on the door, from above the level of the spikes. “*Yoo xat duwasaakw* Sea Raven Yellow Seal,” a Tlingit-speaking female voice said. “*I am Yellow Seal, of the Sea Raven clan,*” Jacasser translated. Tlingits often greeted strangers by proclaiming their names. Only Jacasser had never heard of a Sea Raven clan, and why would anyone travel in this storm?

“What do you want?” Jacasser demanded, in Tlingit. “Do you speak French?” he added in French. “Do you speak English?” he added, in that language. Jacasser knew Tlingit, but the Indians angered quickly, and giving offense was easy in a language where a word’s tone defines its meaning.

“Speak English,” the answer came, in an accent that resembled, but differed from, Tlingit in a way that made Jacasser feel vaguely uneasy. “Must speak. Big important. White Man let Yellow Seal in?”

Jacasser’s first impulse was to scream, “Go away.” His cabin’s creaking timbers reminded him of his desperate position. Why reject any possible help? He patted the gun’s smooth coldness. Should trouble come, he would be ready. Jacasser opened the door.

The ugliest Tlingit woman he had ever seen stood outside the door, her spruce-root hat almost covering her bulging, wide-set eyes. She wore a woven cedar-bark skirt, decorated with the puffin beaks that marked her as a shaman. The skirt fit so poorly that Jacasser could not help but wonder if she usually wore clothing. Small octopus and abalone tattoos decorated her frog-like features. To complete the froggy picture, she hopped through the doorway with a flopping, loping gait.

His eyes reached past the Indian. The snow was tossed as though a hundred men had shoveled for hours. The Indian’s tracks, fast disappearing in the falling snow, indicated that she had approached after the onslaught. Jacasser shut the door, containing what heat his fireplace produced. “What do you want?” he asked, lowering the rifle but keeping it ready. The rattling cabin door had unnerved him, even if, as he now suspected, it had been a freakish wind.

Yellow Seal gestured at the cabin’s ceiling. “Snow heavy. House soon fall. White Man stay, White Man die,” she said, with a chilling definitiveness. “White Man go, wind cold. White Man die.” Jacasser grimaced. The Indian had reached the same conclusion he, himself, had. “Yellow Seal make deal,” Yellow Seal continued. She gestured at

the sealskin bag. “White Man give to Yellow Seal, Yellow Seal take White Man to shore. Big safe.”

Jacasser grabbed up the sealskin bag. “There’s only chunks of copper inside,” he lied. Douglas Island’s streams often carried copper from the mountain, and copper rattled like gold. “Too small to use. Not very valuable.”

Yellow Seal’s lipless mouth twisted into a one-sided grimace. “Not copper. Yellow Seal’s brother, Cormorant Diver, work sea gold. White Man take from beach,” Yellow Seal stated flatly.

Jacasser clasped the sealskin pouch more tightly. Tlingits valued sea-otter as much as anyone, and a stack of pelts rested on a bench he had carved from a fallen alder. “I will trade pelts for taking me to shore,” he said. If he could reach his beached boat, he had a small chance.

“Yellow Seal no want pelts,” she said, with what sounded like exasperation. “Yellow Seal offer more. Cormorant Diver swim good.” She gestured toward the sealskin pouch. “White Man give back gold. Cormorant Diver lead White Man safe to place white men call ‘Ju-neau.’”

Jacasser frowned. Was the Indian mad? No one could swim icy Gastineau Channel during a blizzard. The cabin’s roof groaned ominously beneath the snow. Thoughts of accepting the Indian’s terms darted through his mind. But he couldn’t surrender the gold that he had starved and frozen for!

“Last offer.” The Indian crossed her arms defiantly. “Yellow Seal thought White Man might refuse. Cormorant Diver make ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“White Man give back gold, Cormorant Diver give White Man gold twice what White Man has.”

“Twice?” Jacasser’s heart pounded in his ears. Then his eyes narrowed. “How do I know you won’t leave me to die in the snow?”

“Reach shore first. Then trade.” For the first time, Jacasser noticed the webbing between the Indian’s fingers. “Deal?”

“Why would you would trade more gold for less?”

“White Man steal gold that Yellow Seal give away. Yellow Seal steal back, gift no good. Yellow Seal hurt or kill and take, gift no good.” Jacasser silently cringed at her casual mention of torturing or killing him, but his exterior remained placid. “White Man no give back, gift no good,” the Indian continued. Her features tightened. “Gift no good, big bad thing happen.”

Jacasser nodded. Maybe she wanted the particular gold nuggets for some Indian give-away foolishness. Tlingits put so much stock in giving things away that they sometimes impoverished themselves. But gold was good, and twice as much was better; no foolishness there. Jacasser fingered his rifle's cold, metallic barrel. Three times was best of all. "We have a deal," he muttered.

The Indian flung open the door. A sudden gust extinguished the fireplace. She began to sing what, to Jacasser's ears, sounded like a shaman song. First it echoed the sounds of surf pounding a rocky beach. Then it became wind whipping over the waves. The Indian turned to Jacasser. "Follow," she ordered. She hopped out into the snow. Jacasser, holding his gun and the sealskin bag, followed.

Jacasser was unsure how the Indian lead him through the blinding snow. His mind presented an impossible a *mélange* of an opium eater's dreams with the visions of a drunkard denied alcohol. Had snow and stone heaved like ocean waves, parting before the Indian? Had towering trees, bedecked with frozen witch's hair moss, moved to clear the way? He did not know. He was only certain that he found himself near his beached boat. He surveyed the steel gray waters, hissing with falling snow. He turned, looking back at the island.

A dozen yards behind, Yellow Seal perched on a snow-covered fallen spruce. She pointed a stubby finger at him. "Trade now."

A splash in the waves made Jacasser spin back toward the surf. An Indian, naked except for his metallic nose ring, emerged from the freezing waters. His broad staring eyes and wide expressionless mouth made him even more frog-like than Yellow Seal. Kelp wrapped the Indian's bare arms, as though he had swum the unforgiving ocean's depths. Gripped in his webbed fingers was the largest nugget Jacasser had ever seen. Jacasser's knees grew weak at the thought that it would soon be his. "*Yoo xat duwasaakw* Sea Raven Cormorant Diver," the Indian said, his voice a deep croak. He hopped onto the beach.

"Three times the gold is best of all," Jacasser muttered, in French. He raised his rifle and squeezed the trigger. Pungent black smoke and orange fire emerged. The naked Indian's chest exploded. His mouth opened and closed, like that of a beached fish. He reeled on his feet. He collapsed, gave a convulsive shiver, and then lay still.

Yellow Seal howled in grief. "My brother is dead!" she cried, reverting to the Tlingit language. "The one who gave me joy is dead! If I knew the way to the spirit world, I would follow him!" she sang, pounding the downed spruce as though it were a great drum.

Jacasser smiled. *If I could, I would follow* appeared in many Tlingit mourning songs. "You will follow soon enough," he whispered. He swung the rifle toward her.

Yellow Seal covered the space between Jacasser and herself in two bounds. Before Jacasser could react, she had his rifle. She held it over her head, hands apart. She grimaced as she strained. The rifle bent. She threw the unfirable weapon aside. Then she rode Jacasser to the ground.

"You fool!" she spat, in rapid-fire Tlingit. "You took the gold my brother and I had given to the spirit of the island! A gift, once given, is tainted if taken by force or stealth. We tried to regain it in trade, so we could return it to the island spirit!" She cuffed Jacasser with mule-kick force. No Indian—no human—could be that strong. "I even convinced the island spirit to let me talk to you!"

She leapt off Jacasser, landing in the cold surf. She scooped up the dead body and plunged into the water. "Fool!" she cried one final time. "I wish I had let the island have you." Then the uncanny pair—hybrids between Tlingits and some unknown sea creature, for all Jacasser knew—vanished into cold, gray Gastineau Channel.

Jacasser stumbled to his feet. He surveyed his surroundings. He was unarmed, but he had his boat. He had his found gold. And, best of all, Yellow Seal had left the treasure that Cormorant Diver had dropped. He brushed the snow from his boat. Jacasser smiled. Maybe all would be well after all.

An ocean and earth reek permeated the cold air. The earth trembled beneath Jacasser's feet. A sound, like the 'doom, doom' of Indian drums penetrated his ears. Jacasser spun. The earth behind him swelled into a lump the size of the zoo elephant Jacasser had once seen in his native Quebec. The mound moved, tossing snow as it did. It rumbled toward Jacasser.

The thing that attacked his cabin had been no wind, he now realized. It had been... this thing. The thing came closer. Jacasser's limbs freed themselves from fear's momentary paralysis. Jacasser ran. The thing followed. Jacasser fell on the sharp rocks, sending waves of sharp pain through his battered knees. He tried to get to his feet. Before he could, the moving mound was on him.

Jacasser screamed. A crushing pressure pushed him down, followed by a sensation of sinking. Darkness descended.

Jacasser did not know how much time had elapsed when he regained consciousness. The cries of unseen men surrounded him. Most



sounded Indian, but a few sounded white. Their wailing voices said that madness had, long ago, taken them. Was the moving mound of earth the so-called 'spirit of the island'? Were the cries he heard those of others that had been overwhelmed, as he had been?

Before Jacasser had time to think through his situation, a wave of alien sensations crashed over him. Somehow, he was everywhere on the island at once, as though he had become part of the island. He felt the seals flop on the beach. He sensed the spruce roots reach into the earth. He felt the falling snow touch down on trees and rocks. He sensed the bears, sleeping in their dens. He felt the island's very stones, the roots of towering Mount Meek in the island's center, the minerals that lay beneath it.

And, in the mountain's depths, lay gold... much gold.

Jacasser shouted for joy. "Gold! Gold!" More gold than he had ever imagined! All his!

Jacasser smiled. Or at least he came as close as his new state allowed. What did he care for the cries of madmen? Or that he now occupied a strange new place? He settled back, reveling in his newfound treasure's cold rich radiance. Jacasser was content. ●



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## BOOK-LEARNIN'

### Sunder Cameron Addams

NICK OPENED HIS EYES TO SOFT SILVER LIGHT STREAMING IN OVER THE walls of a roofless chamber. As he elbowed himself into a sitting position, an alien moon, its full argent majesty drowning half the stars, swam into view above one wall.

His gasp reminded him to breathe, and when he did so, his heartbeat intruded on his ears, sounding as thunderous as it did when he swam underwater. He tore his gaze from the titanic moon and blinked at the tottering stones about him. Rubbing a hand through the springy moss he'd been lying on, he detected a pleasant woodsy scent.

Wait—his bed was a button-pocked mattress.

With a cry, he plummeted, yet didn't fall in any direction, caught himself on the edge of his mattress, and clung as if it might escape. His mattress. His room. The streetlight outside the window revealed his sheetrock walls, his homemade altar, and—hallelujah!—his precious books. Nick leaped up, slamming toes into a block-and-board bookcase, and struck the light switch. By the sour light of one bare bulb, he yanked the paperbacks to him, babbling, "I did it, I did it, I was there..."

The sight of his room checked his exaltation: stained ceiling, milk-crate nightstand, the hole where a doorknob belonged. Books cascaded to the carpet remnant as he sank onto his mattress. Could such as he, Nick Coggins, have in truth dreamed his way to a realm where a nameless orb poured silver into ruins unroofed by antiquity?

Fingering his threadbare sheets, Nick thought about how strange they felt, then contemplated the fingers. It was unimaginable that, moments ago, these coarse digits had explored the softness of otherworldly foliage. *Just a fancy dream*, he decided.

His nose caught a ghostly whiff of forest.

Trembling, he sniffed and sniffed again. Faint, fading, gone, but the fragrance of bruised moss had come back from the dream-realm on his grubby-nailed fingers. "Oh... ohsweetjeezus kee-rist-on-a-stick!" He

dared not chance waking the household, but his mouth would not be still; he wanted to whirl, shout, go bounding down the street in his elastic-shot boxers. Fists tight, he kept it to a fierce whisper, "I c-can do—it—worked. It worked. I am a t-true dreamer. Oh my God. I am!"

He had discovered the works of Machen, Lovecraft, and the other old masters of wonder and horror by accident, when brother-in-law Joe had brought home a bag of yard sale paperbacks. Nick suspected Joe had been attracted by the grotesques on the covers, and then disappointed to find many hard words and no gory pictures between those covers.

"Here you go," he'd said, shoving the bag into Nick's arms. "Don't say I never gave you nothing."

Nick could tell Joe thought it was funny, giving his dim-witted relative books too difficult for himself. Though Nick didn't read well, the little that he could puzzle out in the books fascinated him. He'd never seen anything like them.

The only books in the Coggins house were Bibles and his sister Tammy's romance novels. Nick's teachers had known what family he came from. Whenever he had mangled grammar or asked a stupid question, he'd sensed their satisfaction. *Of course. He's one of those kids.*

One time, a new teacher had given him a batch of tests. Mr. Filmore spent weeks trying to get Daddy to come to a parent-teacher conference about the results. Daddy ignored the whole thing until Mr. Filmore called him and said Nick was entitled, by law, to a bunch of stuff the school wasn't doing, and they needed to do something about it.

Daddy had agreed to meet with the teacher and had even taken his suit out of its plastic bag to wear. But then he got arrested, and he couldn't get bond because he hadn't completed his last probation. By the time he got out, Mr. Filmore had gone back to wherever in the wide world he came from, and no one ever mentioned the tests again.

Then, two years out of high school, Nick found himself with this bag of tantalizing books. He bought a pocket dictionary and began studying them, developing a vocabulary far beyond that which he was able to use in conversation. Partway through "The White Powder," he ventured to the library to learn about this "Payne Knight" person.

Intimidated by the computerized catalog, he wandered around hoping to observe someone else using it and wound up among the

public computers. When he was on the verge of slinking away, a university student noticed him and kindly explained the basics of computer use, including search engines. Search engines were terrific. He could look up perplexing words and study the results at his own speed. In addition to explanations of such concepts as “metaphysics,” he happened upon terms like “autism” and “Asperger’s Syndrome.” He kind of wished he hadn’t. Understanding the labels made him feel like some weird bug. However, there were plenty of other interesting paths for his mind to follow.

His family thought he had a girl. He let them go right on thinking that. They’d never expressed an opinion of such an exotic place as the library, but he’d an idea they wouldn’t approve. Daddy especially wouldn’t tolerate such foolishness. Earl Coggins had made Nick drop out of school the day he legally could.

“Boy needs to start earning a living. I never went no further’n tenth, and I done alright.” Daddy had looked around the dinner table as though daring anyone to contradict him.

“Be wasted on a ‘tard, anyhow,” Joe said.

“My son ain’t no ‘tard! He’s just got his head off in another world all the time. His Mama was the same way. He can’t help it.”

“I’m just saying. They give it a long name, these days. But what it comes to is nobody needs eleventh grade to bag groceries.”

Daddy had shaken his head. “We need him bringing in more than that. I’ll have a word with old Doc Cantrell’s brother what took over his practice.”

Nick still winced at the memory of that conversation. He hadn’t liked school but had believed that school was the only route out of his wretched world.

To supplement his library reading, Nick plundered the secondhand bookstore, carting away its dustiest, moldiest volumes: *Astral Flight*, *Celephais*, *Lucid Dreamers*. From them, he learned of the dimension that lay next his own, so, so close, yet farther than the most remote galaxy. In this dream-realm a true dreamer might explore miles of terraced gardens musical with improbable fountains, dare the splendid perils between the stars, and parlay with supernal entities and immundane creatures hinted at in the oldest myths of humankind. *All* one needed was the technique of transitioning the adamantine barriers of perception.

It puzzled him that the librarians shelved books such as *The Silver*

*Key* and *The Out-Of-Body Experience* in different sections, when the only difference was one was a narrative and the other an instruction manual. However, many things in his life made even less sense, so he didn’t give the matter much thought. One night, during a family shouting match, his thoughts crystallized into decision. He would assault the Gate of Dreams. If he failed, he’d have wasted his time, which was of little value. If he succeeded... oh, it was too magnificent to contemplate.

When he started burning incense, his family thought he was covering the smell of pot and insisted he “share the wealth.” Tammy got downright nasty about it. Nick asked among Daddy’s buddies until he found a fellow who grew his own, then started buying it for his family. He didn’t want Tammy rifling the “selfish sumbitch’s” room, finding his arcane implements, and telling the End Times Warriors’ Ministry her brother was a Satanist. Whenever a joint was passed around, Nick stammered excuses. The stories indicated that only rare, exotic drugs aided true dreamers. Marijuana seemed too pedestrian to be useful.

And so, finally, to his first success. For a week following this triumph, Nick’s body coasted on habit while his preoccupied mind relived those splendid seconds: the moss, the stone room open to the sky, the breathtaking light. Nightly he replicated the successful ritual, his own hodge-podge of occult formulae, Neopagan tools and symbols, self-hypnosis, and meditation. *Didn’t stay long*, he thought, *but it’s a start. I’ll get better, now that I know it works.*

Yet after that one night, he slept soundly, and no dreams came. The sick dread that used to precede exams now created hesitations and errors in his rites. He couldn’t have reached the dream-realm only once, never to see it again! For reassurance, he returned to his books, re-reading favorite passages.

One morning while trudging to the animal hospital, Nick reexamined his sole successful transition. Perhaps worrying about the failed rituals was confounding his ability to cross over—and wasn’t *that* something to worry about? How does one stop worrying about being worried? His books would call it a “paradox,” but knowing the word didn’t help.

He snagged a couple of beer cans and frowned at them. At this point in his walk, his bag should’ve contained a dozen cans. Tammy let him keep only fifty dollars out of each paycheck, and now some of

that went for pot. He needed his can money for ritual supplies.

After scanning up and down the roadside, he happened to glance ahead toward the town's sole traffic light and saw a dog wobble partway across the intersection. A pickup roared past him and aimed for the animal.

"Hey! Back! Oh no, get back!"

The dog leaped onto the sidewalk. Nick ground his nails into his palms. He heard the driver cuss as the tires nerfed the curb. The truck caromed away and continued through the intersection.

"Whee-ew!" Grinning, Nick loped toward the dog, slowing when it cringed. "'S'okay, fella. Not gonna hurt'cha."

With soft words and lunch bits, he coaxed the animal to follow him through the intersection, past the city limit, and halfway down the side road to the animal hospital. There he halted.

"Can't take you to work with me, boy. At least there ain't so many cars here." He scattered his last sandwich well off from the road. "That'll keep you busy. Stay 'way from cars, okay?" The dog edged toward the food. It resembled a Carolina dog except its fur appeared white under the dirt. "Never seen you 'round here before. You lost?"

When he spoke, the dog halted and looked at him. Then it grabbed a bite, shook its head, and gulped. Nick smiled. "Got to kill it first, huh?"

Once more, the animal stopped and looked at him. "You're a gen-tee-el fella, ain't you? That means polite and well-mannered. Do you suppose I said it right? Reckon if I didn't, you'd be too gen-tee-el to say so."

Leaving the dog to finish, Nick scrambled back to the roadside. He found six more cans before reaching the hospital.

His good fortune didn't survive the day, alas. That night the ritual failed again.

Four fruitless weeks passed before silver light once more spilled through his eyelids and awakened Nick. He spent several minutes reveling in his accomplishment, looking, smelling, and touching. It was the same roofless room, even to the bed of moss. He expected to be slammed back to Earth momentarily, but when this didn't happen he essayed the doorway.

He was in a simple stone building much fallen into decay. Roof debris raised the floor several inches and made for tricky footing. Corners and other sheltered areas on the crumbling walls revealed faint

murals that suggested startling things to his racing mind. Sounds too faint to identify trickled over the walls.

The lunar disc provided ample light for locating the ruin's outer doorway. The blackness of the surrounding hills bewildered him at first; then he smiled. He'd expected the mystery-wrecking lights of cars and houses. This realm lacked such night-sky pollution, and the moonlight splashed an inkblot behind every hummock.

Raising his gaze to the night's mighty lantern, he could feel its light wash over his face. The entire facing hemisphere caught the rays of the invisible sun and hurled them onto the ground, onto him, like rarefied rain. His palm, extended over his head at arm's length, was not wide enough to cover the entire disk. Was this satellite simply that much larger than Earth's companion, or was it rushing through the blackness of space unthinkably close to its primary—and to his head? He felt as if he could give a prodigious bound and reach its surface, in the manner of cats. There was something important about the moon's roundness... he would think of it...

*Of course, that's why I made it!* Taking a deep breath, Nick intoned a prayer that would have horrified the preacher. Then he started to step across the threshold.

An unseen force sent him reeling. Slipping on the treacherous floor, he sat down hard. The room darkened and blurred, and his scrabbling hands found—a rug?

A light clicked on. Nick blinked down at the kitchen doormat. He scrambled up, turned, and faced his shotgun-waving brother-in-law. Joe wore backward boxers and a scowl. "Was that you crashing around? What the hell you think you doing, waking folks up in the middle of the night? Idiot!"

"Sorry, Joe."

Tammy said from the doorway, "Is it a burglar?"

"Naw, just your brother, running around in the dark. Boy, why'n't you turn a damn light on?"

"Dunno. I sorta woke up here."

"Sleepwalking!" Daddy shoved past Tammy into the kitchen and nodded as though he'd made a telling point. "Runs in his mama's family."

"Don't you blame everything Nick does on Mama. She was my Mama too."

"Just so he don't do it again, dammit. Some folks got to get up an' go to work," Joe said, although he rose for work after Nick did.

Back in his room, Nick plunged into his books, searching for the key to staying in the dream-realm. When smeary sunrise streaked his window, he gave up and ambled into the kitchen.

Daddy was already up, eating breakfast. "You ain't never sleep-walked afore, boy. Whatsa matter?"

"Dunno." Nick stumbled over a tackle box. "You and your buddies going to the fish camp today?"

"Yup. Check come yesterday. Gonna spend a whole month, no womenfolk to pester us, bathe onces a week whether I need to or not!" A car horn blared outside. Daddy grabbed his gear and dashed out the door, leaving his greasy breakfast dishes on the table. At least he'd also left some thick slices of fried bacon.

After breakfast, Nick fixed sandwiches and added an entire package of bologna, as well as the rinds off the bacon, to his lunch sack. If he didn't see the dog, he'd leave the meat in the woods where he'd fed it before.

On his way out, he checked the calendar. According to his books, the moon was considered to be full for two or even three nights in succession. *Too bad nobody told the Gate of Dreams.* Evidently, the dream-realm was accessible only on the night when the moon was at maximum fullness. With slow steps, he headed for work by the feeble light of Earth's setting moon.

A week later, Tammy discovered Daddy hadn't given any money to the landlord. Nick focused on his vacuuming as she and Joe blamed each other for not getting the money before he left. A door slammed, and "The Ascension of Christ" leaped off the wall.

After discarding the broken picture, Nick swept up the glass. He was trying to persuade the decrepit vacuum to pick up the slivers when Joe came out of the bedroom. Tammy followed him, carrying a bag. She stalked past the men and went out the back door. Joe motioned for the machine to be switched off.

"Listen, me an' Tammy's going to the races with Ed and Amy after all. Got to get us a break from this damn place. Gonna stay all weekend, so don't let nobody swipe the stereo, hear?"

"Okay, Joe," Nick said to Joe's departing back. Then he grinned; Tammy hadn't thought to use Daddy's dereliction to demand his pocket money. There were so many videos he longed to watch. He could afford to rent a few recent ones, and afterward there was always cable. *I saw* The Neverending Story *and* Big Trouble in Little China *in*

*the weekend guide.* Tremors *is on tonight; I can watch it without Joe's yammering about how Rhonda LeBeck is really a dyke.* He shook his head. *And Joe calls me stupid?*

As he searched his room for his video card, he noticed his eyes kept straying to a particular anthology. He pulled the volume out and read until he found the tale that called to him. It told how a "backwoods dullard" had successfully transcended Earth-reality after a "whiskey debauch." Whiskey was a drug? A drug that might work?

*Much good that does me. Since that chain bought the liquor store, the clerks have started carding. There isn't much in the liquor cabinet, and if I get into Daddy's stash while he's gone...* Sighing, he put the book back. As he did so, the thought completed itself; *...he'll figure that I could never find where he'd hidden it, so he'll blame Joe or Tammy.*

"Ha!" Nick wished he could cackle like Vincent Price. He settled for what he hoped was an evil smile and sped to his father's room.

It was harder to light incense while drunk than he'd imagined. His meditation didn't get far before he simply passed out. Nevertheless, it worked. Nick awakened clear-headed in a familiar stone room.

He advanced to the outer doorway and gazed across the dusky landscape. The western horizon was limned in multicolored fire by the hidden sun. Northwest, a towering bulk arrested his gaze. A quarter-mile or so separated the ruin from a stone pinnacle, which glittered as though flecked with mica or something more precious. It was too tall and thin to be a natural outcropping, too majestic to be the product of human hands.

After holding his breath until he was through the doorway, Nick set out for the spire. He brushed through a riot of musky flowers, where droning not-bees wandered, and then lost sight of his goal under a canopy of antediluvian trees that exchanged ghastly secrets on the breeze. Their roots, as thick as conventional boles, crowded the banks of a stream that chuckled as if it, too, knew something he didn't.

He stepped from the trees to find all sunlight had fled. The spire jutted monstrously up from a starlit meadow as though incalculable forces had summoned it from the planet's depths, incongruous as a flint dagger thrust through the back of a pastoral scene from a church calendar.

"It has to be real," Nick whispered, "the likes of me couldn't ever imagine..." Wonder and terror warred in his soul at the sight of the thing, beside which even the glorious moon was diminished, and he



exulted in the conflict. He craned upward at the sky-raking apex, slipped, and fell backward. He started to clamber to his feet, still angling for a sight of the peak, then glimpsed movement across the meadow. He froze, straining to see... and his point-of-view zoomed across the meadow as if his eyes possessed telephoto lenses. This development so startled him that it took several seconds for him to comprehend what he was seeing. He thought himself prepared for anything: nightgaunt, ghoul, knight of Kuran. Whatever shape his reeling mind expected to behold, whatever mutation or unnamable being his studies had braced him for, in no wise was he prepared for what he saw.

A girl stepped into the starlight. She wore jeans and sturdy boots and moved with the lithe assurance of an athlete. He watched her looking about, her expression one of wonder, though she couldn't possibly feel such wonder as did he. She flipped a lock of wavy hair from her eyes, checked, and yanked the hair forward into her view again. She studied it as if she'd never seen its like, glanced past it, and noticed Nick.

He saw her eyes widen. She considered the lock of hair once more, looked at him, and applauded, laughing.

The sound freed Nick from his stupefaction. Scarcely knowing what he did, he rose and sidled into the open. Moving restored his viewpoint to normal, which was fortunate, or else he might've tripped again. Even by starlight, he could see the bronze-gold of the girl's shoulder-length hair and the indigo of her denim clothing. He longed to know the color of her eyes, but now his viewpoint wouldn't budge.

He thought of sirens, of lamia and the like, but there seemed nothing impossible about the girl's loveliness, nothing otherworldly in her laughter. *Of course, could be that's what I'm supposed to think.* After a brief war with common sense, Nick strode toward her. She stood her ground, smiling, and watched him.

Without a flicker of warning, he was knocked onto his back. He perceived in the instantaneous contact that his invisible assailant was harder than flesh, yet elastic. He looked wildly about for some sign of the monster.

He was sprawled at the edge of the Griffiths' hayfield. What had been a rugged spire of stone was merely the abandoned cell phone tower. Directly in front of him was the padlocked chain-link fence, festooned with rusty warnings, which surrounded the tower and rendered half the field unusable.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hobbling barefoot, Nick crept home and slunk inside. The gaping back door alarmed him until he remembered having propped it open and raised the few windows that weren't painted shut, in hopes of catching a breeze. Tammy would always veto these things, calling him a "fresh-air fiend." Now he knew why his first attempt to exit the stone ruin had landed him on his butt at the closed back door. Nick flopped face-down onto his mattress.

The girl was another problem. A genuine dream-realm entity shouldn't look like—that. His subconscious, which was incapable of crafting such a magnificent menace as the spire, could've fashioned her all too easily. Was he sleepwalking through ordinary dreams? Nick gripped his hair in both hands. Perhaps he wasn't a true dreamer after all. *There's always the shotgun...*

He pulled himself together, a little, upon remembering that many dreamers couldn't bring their corporeal forms through the Gate. Even the fact that his ungainly body mimicked his dream-self's actions was not unprecedented. Nevertheless, the girl couldn't be dismissed with the same ease. What did she signify? Nick fell asleep pondering her behavior, which didn't fit a mundane dream any better than it did the dream-realm. What was the business with the hair?

He spent the next day recovering from the grandmother of all hangovers. Lacking enough whiskey to attempt another crossing, he crashed early and slept without dreaming. Sunday he erased all evidence of his escapade, tidied the house, and watched more movies.

Joe and Tammy returned after dark and began carrying on about the delights of stock car racing. Never before had their manner seemed so uncouth, their lives so trivial, as they seemed to Nick that evening. He fled their company as soon as he might, not even trying to deflect the jibes thrown his way.

Safe in his room, he re-read his oldest books and by midnight had his answer. "Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath" left no doubt. The girl was another true dreamer. Somewhere in the world, there was someone else just like Nick.

Early the next morning Nick, clasping a jacket-wrapped bundle, barreled into the veterinary hospital. An ear-wrenching racket met him when his entrance startled Cindy into dropping her metal clipboard. Without slowing, he crossed the kennel and shouldered through the swinging doors. "Doc, we got a 'mergency! Doc!"

Cindy overtook him as he lowered his burden onto the surgery table. "Hey! I just cleaned that!" Nick drew breath to yell again.

"All right, all right, I'm here."

Cindy spun around to face Dr. Cantrell, who was peering over his glasses at the creature on the formerly spotless table. She started to speak, but Nick forestalled her. "Doc, I think a car hit him. Can you help him? Please?"

"Cindy, hold him." Dr. Cantrell moved Nick aside, and there was nothing for the technician to do but cradle the dirty animal. It lay quietly, its gaze never leaving Nick's face. "Your dog?"

"No sir. I been trying to make friends with him, even though Daddy says we can't have a dog. He don't belong to nobody as I know."

"Abandoned, I suppose." After moments of silent inspection, Dr. Cantrell stepped back and looked at Nick. Cindy glanced up at veterinarian's expression and turned to the dog, stroking its head as if she no longer minded the grime.

It took Dr. Cantrell three tries before Nick let himself understand. He swiped his eyes on a sleeve, glad Daddy wasn't there to make fun of him. "Doc," he whispered, "I can't pay you nothing, but I can't leave him like this."

"Forget it." Dr. Cantrell opened the safe and removed a vial. "I'm not going to let him suffer. Just don't go around telling folks I did it for free, all right? About forty pounds, one cc per ten makes four," he added, to himself.

"Can I hold him?"

"You can hold his head, just like Cindy's got it." Dr. Cantrell drew a paw forward, Cindy rolled out the vein, and the needle slipped in. The fluid in the syringe smoked with blood, and Nick looked away—right into the doomed mutt's eyes.

As Dr. Cantrell withdrew the needle, the dog slumped into Cindy's arms. She laid it on its side, and the veterinarian checked for a heartbeat. Nick stared. "It's... over?"

After removing his stethoscope, Dr. Cantrell cleared his throat and said, "Yes, it's over. He didn't feel a thing." He patted Nick on the arm and hastened from the surgery.

Cindy said, "It didn't hurt. This stuff is like falling asleep." She gave Nick a small smile. "And maybe waking up someplace else. Remove the body please. I have to clean the table again."

"He winked at me."

"What?"

"Right 'fore you caught him. He looked right at me, friendly-like, and winked at me real deliberate."

Cindy shrugged. "They often move involuntarily at death. It doesn't mean anything."

After work, Nick wrapped the little corpse in a worn whelping blanket, carried it home, and buried it. It seemed so sad that the dog should die ownerless, and by burying it, he felt he was claiming it. He owned a dead dog—the only kind he could have.

He placed a cinder block for a headstone and said, "Carter. Your name's Carter."

"Who you talking to?"

Nick whirled around. "Uh... nobody, Joe."

"He's talking to the air. Great. Listen, I didn't know Tammy'd already let the damn rent get so far behind. Probably gonna have to find us another place."

"But... Daddy can catch it up some when he..."

"Ha. Your Daddy's done spent every cent of that disability check by now. Maybe we can find us a new place, move while the S.O.B. is gone. Serve him right if he has to hunt us."

"Anyway, look around there where you work for someplace to rent out that way. Rents are getting too high this side of town."

Joe strode back to the house. Nick sank onto Carter's headstone. How could he reach the monolith if his body had to sleepwalk through town?

Nick dared not await the moon's pleasure to traverse the Gate. He had to find some way to force the issue, for he'd have little chance of finding his fellow-dreamer once he could no longer reach the spire. He knew that she needn't be there; she could be anywhere in the realm. She might cross over at a different time, or never make it back at all. But he had to try to see her again, and the fearsome spire was his best hope. There had to be—

"What on Earth are you doing?"

He jumped. "Uh, cleaning water bowls?"

"You did that already." Cindy lowered a groggy retriever to the grooming stand. "I need a recovery cage for this dog, remember?"

"Sorry. Right!" He scurried to the cages.

"Whoa, cut the water off first!" Cindy shook her head. "Where's your brain today?"

The kennel was in order by the time Dr. Cantrell checked on the retriever. Nick heard him say to Cindy, "I got the entire mass, so if it hasn't metastasized he should be fine."

"I'm glad the owner decided not to put him down after all."

Disbelieving his ears, Nick drifted closer to the cages. Someone had considered killing this fine animal?

"Thanks for reminding me." The veterinarian took from his pocket the vial of blue fluid he'd used when Carter died. "Need to put this back." He turned to leave the kennel. Cindy followed, brimming with questions as usual.

"Close call, fella," Nick whispered. He opened the cage and reached in to pet the dog.

"—drug addicts break in."

Halting in mid-ear-scratch, he held his breath and listened. Dr. Cantrell said, "In sub-lethal doses the drug has a potent mind-altering effect. But even if they get into the hospital, they can't open the safe." He turned in the doorway. "Keep an eye on that dog for the next hour." Nick nodded.

As Cindy followed Dr. Cantrell through the door, she said, "Make sure you don't leave the combination where someone could find it."

"It's not written down. It's set to something I'm not likely to forget." The door closed.

For the rest of the morning Nick tried to engage in everyday small talk with the rest of the staff, though he had little practice with such things. Nevertheless, he was able to work the lunch conversation around to where he could ask Cindy her age. As if it were an afterthought, he also asked Dr. Cantrell his. Cindy raised her eyebrows before answering, and he realized she might've misconstrued his interest. Once, dating Cindy would have seemed like the answer to all his prayers. But Nick's prayers were peculiar these days.

That evening he buffed the waiting room, his excuse for remaining late, before taking down the wall calendar. He flipped through until he found "Doctor C's Birthday" penciled in. After writing "9-28" on a sticky note, Nick replaced the calendar and got Cindy's desk calculator.

*It's May now. Doc'll be fifty, come his birthday.* His thick fingers took four tries to get it right. After subtracting, he wrote down another number and marched to the safe.

He was going to steal from a man he liked and respected. Nick promised himself that for the next month, he'd do his final half-hour of

chores after clocking out, but this didn't help his conscience much.

Nine.

Back past zero.

Twenty-eight.

Forward past zero.

Forty-nine.

*Click.*

Nick placed the vial on the countertop as if it contained nitroglycerin, then whispered, "'One cc per ten pounds.' If that kills, maybe... half?" He prepared a syringe and inserted the needle into the vial as he'd seen Doc do. He pushed air in, had a panicky moment when pulling the plunger drew air right back out, and then remembered to turn the vial upside-down.

Sweating, he reconsidered the dosage. Vets probably administered an ample dose, to make the animal's death swift and certain. He wasn't going to aim for a vein, but even so a half-dose might be enough to kill. Carefully, he withdrew six cc's—a quarter dose.

Capped syringe safe in his pocket, Nick spent ten minutes putting everything back properly. He spent ten more minutes reassuring himself that everything was, in fact, put back properly, and then locked up and left.

At home, he gulped dinner and then jittered in his room until Joe and Tammy settled in front of the television. Then he slipped out to the tool shed and secured the bolt-cutters, whispering "Hey, Carter," as he passed the little grave.

Nick sauntered alongside the blacktop as if headed for the Kwikie-Stopp, bolt-cutters completely concealed inside his windbreaker. It was too warm for the jacket, but this was no time to be questioned by law enforcement.

When he returned and sneaked back into the house an hour later, Joe and Tammy were still parked. He did the dishes, showered, retreated to his room, and waited.

He heard the other two moving about and going to their bedroom. Still he waited.

The hour past midnight, Nick ghosted through the house and propped the back door open. He prepared the ritual, then, before he could reconsider, jammed the needle into his arm.

Upon springing from his verdant bed, Nick stretched his arms out as though to embrace the half-moon, which was brighter than Earth's



full moon. Feeling moved to chant, he did so, the tongue-twisting syllables flowing silkily from his lips. Then he strode from the ruin. The moon-shadows cast by the crumbling walls seemed solid, as though the situation was reversed, and the shadows were casting the walls.

When he turned toward the stone spire, he noted the return of his astonishing vision. He could see that many of its surfaces, which appeared sheer from a distance, were fissured and broken. A bold fellow might conquer the thing, on a night such as this one.

Retracing his steps to the secretive brook, he drew deep breaths and imagined that the flowers poured forth their fragrance more extravagantly than before. The unnatural blooms seemed like comrades, as if the rambunctious plants were encouraging him to best the hostile monolith that defied their feeble roots. When he reached the brook he was giddy from the perfume. If the water on this occasion murmured warnings instead of mysteries, Nick cared not.

He halted at the meadow. The girl was already there. His confidence folded like an ill-pitched tent. She saw him and waved. His feet wanted to bolt, but he raised a hand.

Once again, she pulled a strand of hair around in front of her eyes and looked at it. Then she smiled and blew him a kiss. *Why does she keep looking at her hair?*

His countenance must've shown his perplexity. The girl beckoned him to follow her toward the spire's base. She seemed to spy what she sought in a dell and approached it, motioning him to do likewise. He complied, ready for he knew not what. She pointed to a puddle that lay in the hollow. Moonlight made of it a mirror, which cast back the reflections of the girl and her slender companion.

He clapped a hand to his face. In the puddle's surface, a young Oriental man pressed a fine-fingered hand to his mouth. From his silken garments to his aristocratic mien, he looked nothing whatever like Nick.

A weight of hair lay upon his neck. Had it been there all along? His hair was always crew cut at Daddy's insistence. Nevertheless, he was able to draw a lock in front of his eyes: a lock that was glossy and black.

The sound of a laugh startled him back from the puddle, hot-faced, but the girl was not laughing at him. She pointed to the strand he held and took a bow.

*Oh!* Somehow, each of them created the other's appearance in this demesne. Nick joined her, noting that his laugh no longer sounded like

braying. His fellow dreamer must be Oriental in the mundane world, which was why her golden hair had astounded her.

He considered how lucky it was that their dream-realm visits had coincided again. The thought came to him that she'd been returning to the monolith nightly. He imagined her prowling around its base, peering into the black shadows of the forest. No, that made no sense, that she should search for—she got his attention and nodded, once. *I didn't picture those scenes inside my head. She did.*

She pointed to herself. "Cho." For an instant, smog burned Nick's lungs; he glimpsed thronged, narrow streets. The sensations whirled, were replaced by the smell of grease, exotic herbs, and decay. A pinch-faced shopkeeper counted grimy currency, and a liver-spotted hand snatched the precious package...

He flung the perceptions away. He had no business seeing her other life. It had no more to do with the real Cho than a sordid Southern town had to do with him. He placed a hand on his chest and bowed. "Nicholas." Then, gesturing toward the top of the looming spire, he arched his brows. She nodded and made a show of squaring her shoulders. A part of his mind kept trying to intrude a picture of a gaunt tower, but the girl, the scent of the flowers, and the marvels that kept piling onto marvels crowded the image out.

Several hundred feet later, Nicholas swung up beside Cho and brushed himself off. Silk was much tougher than it looked. Their latest ledge floored a chimney. Overhead, cold stars flocked a circle of black sky. Fifteen feet to the top.

As they climbed this last stretch, Nicholas heard a disconcerting sound above, like sliding wind chimes. He thought he might have been hearing it for some time and exchanged concerned glances with Cho. At the top, supporting his weight by arms alone, he raised his eyes above the level of the stone. She did likewise.

There was a dragon at the top, a dragon of pearl and ice. It had talons, wings, black opal eyes, a sinuous tail, and other appropriate draconic appurtenances—and a curiously canine head. Beneath one oversized forepaw it held the half-crushed corpse of a slick-scaled, horse-headed thing the size of a baby elephant, slain so recently the ice on the leathery wings was still subliming into fog.

Whatever it chose to do, there was nothing they could do about it. Cho must've thought the same thing, for she scrambled up, with him but a heartbeat behind.

Nicholas felt he was now past wonder. *Whatever happens now, he thought, I am a true dreamer. I met Cho. Together we surmounted the glittering pinnacle. These things are forever mine.*

The dragon turned to look at them, and in the depths of its old eyes Nicholas saw the secret laughter of one who has seen the Universe face-on, instead of edge-on as common mortals must see it; has seen it and laughed for joy at the sheer absurdity of it all.

Then the dragon winked.


Wonder came whirling back, snickering. Nicholas gripped Cho's hand and spoke a name. The beast lowered one silver-ribbed wing and exposed the smooth hide just behind its shoulders.

From the Yakima Republic-Herald, Yakima, WA: "Man's Body Found In National Park—Law enforcement officers are treating as a homicide the death of a man whose body was found deep in Mt. Rainier Park Thursday morning. Sergeant Carol Combs of the Yakima Police Department said a park ranger discovered the body, unclothed except for underwear, about 6:30 a.m. Authorities believe the man was dropped from a low-flying aircraft, though neither cause of death nor the man's identity had been determined. The presence of a suspected smuggler's corridor above the park has fueled speculation that his death was drug-related. Combs would not confirm whether the DEA is joining the investigation." ●

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## THE GALVANIC

James S. Dorr

"YE MAY SAY THAT BANKERS HAVE HEARTS OF FLINT," DR. N \_\_\_\_\_ proclaimed—I will not say what his name was here, though you would recognize it if you saw it—"or likewise men of the legal professions, but I will tell you that there are none so hard and unyielding as those of our own Edinburgh physicians."

We strained to hear him, my fellow neophytes and I, as we waited in the dimly lit chamber above Surgeons' Hall for what was to be our first full-body anatomy session. The gas jets' hiss vied with his words for our instructor was quite into his years, so old in fact that he himself had studied under the notorious Dr. Knox, and, prior to that, both Drs. *Monro, secundus et tertius*. His voice thus could rise to little more than a whisper, but he whose work on *The Branchings of the Human Nerve System* is still read today continued to perform demonstrations as his health permitted. And even when not he remained with the College, as he did this night, if not to deliver the lecture from the platform behind the cadaver himself, then at least to wield the exemplary pointer.

Oh, his hands were still steady, if his voice was not—more steady that night than those of some of our own young students, I would dare say myself. One of our fellows had already fainted, in anticipation, and more than one looked a bit green at the jowls. But the old man went on.

"Let me tell you," he said, "of the corpse you will be seeing cut open soon. But before even that, let me tell you a story...."

In days some time back (the aged surgeon said), before the Warburton Anatomy Act was finally passed in '32 which thus allowed subjects for lectures as this night's to be come by legally, there were men—often of dubious honesty—who had to be dealt with, known variously as "Resurrectionists" or "Sack-'em-up Men." These were the ones who supplied the bodies for Schools such as this one, as well as the various private lectures most physicians offered.

The money was good, you see, for their labors. Cadavers were needed—they had to be gotten—and therefore could command prices of thirty or forty pounds or more to those that dug them up. More than enough to provide a living for men with little of education and still less of morals, even when out of the take would come bribes for churchyard sextons, and guards and others, to find different places to cast their eye when the digging and sacking were going on.

So it was too, though, that some cut corners—the Burkes and Hares of our fair city, the Bishops and Mays of London, and others—and some of the corpses received were, to put a delicate point to it, overly fresh. And others were stolen from fellow Sack-‘em-ups, often from Ireland and shipped to our own shores. Gangs roamed the streets for that, robbers of robbers, and not averse to “Burking” their own fellows should the opportunity come for it, requiring only that first there be liquor sufficient to quiet the intended victim in order that the corpse be procured without marks of violence.

Oh, those were shameful days, made all the worse by the rivalries among our own physicians—stealing students one from the other to increase their own fees as well as their learning. But as one’s number of students grew larger, so too did the need for more bodies in order to support yet more lectures. And so the cycle grew, feeding upon itself. Corpses were often mailed in from the countryside by rural constables, seeking to turn a profit from other people’s misfortunes. Bodies from hospitals sometimes were “mis-laid” before they could be claimed by grieving relations. And we, the physicians, the doctors and students, did nothing to stop this. We *needed* cadavers. One cannot bring an ill person to health unless one has first learned the body’s workings, how flesh and muscle and bone and sinew are put together, how nerves and blood vessels bring spark and nutrition to all fleshly parts, that the whole might enjoy life. And thus we, life’s saviors—or so we would hope to be, given enough learning and enough skill—contributed most in our own at-all-costs-avoid-questioning-too-deeply-whence-subjects-came way to what had become the mockery of death’s peace.

And then, Burke and Hare. As I said before, though others preceded them, the need for bodies became so great that some did not even go to the churchyard, but rather selected the poor, the friendless, the widowed, the lonely, the all-but-forgotten shadows of humankind, lost in its corners—or so they thought!—and did them in on the very streets! And all for the rapaciousness of us, the doctors.

Of course they were needed. The bodies, that is. Science could not

advance without them, both for demonstrations for learning, and for other matters. And so too were the Sack-‘em-ups needed in increasing numbers, the latter of course to supply of the former.

But when the ghastly art turned to murder... ah, that’s when the outcry went up of “Foul!” Bad enough to rob graves, and now the public had roused itself up against the ghouls. And against the ghouls’ employers as well.

Knox, who in innocence had but received a fresh-murdered body, found his career ruined. His house nearly burned down. And yet, for us others, by now there was no stopping receiving corpses, whatever their provenance, lest their suppliers should peach on us and we be ruined too.

Thus was the winter of 1830, a year after Burke’s hanging and, by the irony of the law at that time, anatomizing by *Monro tertius* in public session as warning to others who might perform murder. I had of course left Dr. Knox by then—to have done otherwise would have been unsafe—sojourning on the Continent some while with Prof. F\_\_\_\_\_ and Dr. T\_\_\_\_\_. And so, when I returned to Scotland intending to start my own surgical practice, I found conditions somewhat changed.

Oh, the old rivalries among physicians still continued, if anything fiercer than when I had left, but the Resurrectionists’ ways had evolved as they, too, had been forced to take a lower profile. Needing cadavers, I found an Irishman who could provide them. But as that winter proceeded on to spring, all of a sudden, as these things would happen from time to time, the supply dwindled.

I could not find other Sack-‘em-up Men to augment this supply without incurring the wrath of the man I was already in with. Such was the power these men had over us—blackmailers, really, as they turned out to be—that it was almost as if we did *their* bidding than they did ours. And so my Irishman, when I accosted him about the necessity of getting new corpses, put this somewhat peculiar proposition to me:

“Guv’nor,” he said, “I do have this one body, and it shall be yours as soon as it’s ready. And I can get others on similar terms. But ye must pay first. Ye get me drift on this?”

I shook my head. “No.” I did not get his drift, yet.

He explained himself further. “The body is mine. As ye see, I’m in ill health—I shan’t have much time left in any event so I may as well spend me last months in comfort.” He coughed as if to underscore his point, but I believed him. The work at night. The digging of corpses,

some that had passed away of diseases. Not to mention the wrath of the mob that still persisted, making it dangerous for one to be seen on the city's streets at night with just so much as a pick or a shovel. All these conspired to make Resurrection work, at the least, an unhealthy trade.

"But," I protested, "I need a cadaver now. Whether yours or not—and, yes, I see now your hand's palsied shaking and have no doubt of its readiness soon—it must be in my chambers by tomorrow."

"Yes," said my Irishman. "I understand that. But, as I grow frail in my labor, so too has my sister who, as luck would have it, passed on just this evening. She had no friends, Guv'nor. I've told no one of it. And so I suggest to ye that if ye buy my corse on promise, to use as it's ready, I'll sell ye hers also."

What choice had I then? To buy an option on this man's own corpse struck me as foolish. Should he renege later, what recourse would there be? Surely not that of law! And, as I discovered the following winter when, as if by a miracle, his health had come back sufficiently for him to force me to buy a renewal on it, I was more than foolish. And yet, whether it be that of his sister, or of some poor streetwalker he'd had his eye on intending a Burking, I did need a body. And I needed it quickly.

And so, God help me, I took up his offer.

Dr. N\_\_\_\_\_ paused then and signaled one of us to bring him down a pitcher of water. While we waited, I thought I could hear the creak of a door downstairs, and then a faint whirring. The opening, possibly, of a back entrance to the hall, as well—who knows?—as the buzz of flies, maybe. The night was quite warm and even though, under the present law, paupers' bodies could be got from hospitals provided no relatives stood in objection—and that they be given good Christian burial when they were done with—sometimes they would still not be quite of the freshest. And then the faint sound of a gasp—a shriek, maybe.

But by then Dr. N\_\_\_\_\_ had received his water and, confirming that the lecture would indeed be starting shortly, he placed the emptied glass back on its tray and continued his story.

Was this Irishman a *Burker*? A murderer as well as a robber of churchyards? I have little doubt he was. You see, among doctors, though rivals we were, it was quite difficult for such things to be kept

a secret. Our rivalry itself was the cause—we eagerly stole students from one another, passing them back and forth just as first one, then another of us would gain reputation for some new technique or experimentation. And so I had my share of others' students, as they had of mine, and these students brought gossip. Including gossip about this man who supplied to others as well as to me.

But that does not matter, concerning my story. What does is this: That my Irishman had become too greedy. I heard the gossip and soon ascertained that I was not the only surgeon who had paid him well, and continued to pay, for the promise of the use of his own body.

And so I called truce among us surgeons, discussing this, my new found knowledge, first with Dr. B\_\_\_\_\_ the Elder, then with the others, and confirmed that all, or nearly all, of the prominent surgeons of Edinburgh had paid this man for his corpse after death. Indeed, some had paid him for many years for it.

Now when our meeting occurred was in late spring, and then, as now, the Schools closed down from May to October. Thus we determined a confrontation, having no fear of repercussion—at least in terms of his refusing to supply us further should we press him too far—in that we still should have plenty of time to find new sources for the next session. We queried our students and, sure enough, there were several who had an idea of where our man resided. And so one evening the first week of May we marched to the poorer section of town, a fair mob ourselves of torch-bearing doctors, to have it out with him.

What we would have done with him I do not know, except he was forewarned and, seeing our approach from his windows, determined to flee. He lit out a back gate of his tenement and, with us nearly upon his heels, coursed down winding streets and cobble-stoned alleys, often in darkness or very nearly. So the pursuit went, a mile or more, with all the time a fog starting to rise up out of the Firth, when, all of a sudden, he dodged out into the lights of a wide square and directly into the path of a carriage.

The driver pulled his horses up as best he could, but already it was too late to avoid him. We, as doctors, of course took the body that even though most terribly trampled, still had some spark of life left within it. We took him to Surgeons' Square and to this very building here and, such was our oath, we did the best we knew how to save him. To save his worthless life which before—who knows what we might have done in our anger? And yet....

\* \* \* \* \*



Dr. N\_\_\_\_\_ paused again to take more water. His voice had been failing, and yet we'd been listening with such rapt attention I doubt a one of us had missed a single word. In the silence we heard the gas jets and, underneath, in the hall below, the sounds of rustling. Of surgical instruments being made ready. A soft keening sound like the grunt of a workman, perhaps in his straining to move the table the subject of the night would be laid on.

And then, the strength of his voice renewed somewhat, the old man continued.

God help me, I say. We are all of us God-fearing men in this room, I think. Learning the wonder of God's creation, the image of God laid out in Man's body, despite what some of the Rationalists say can only serve to strengthen our Faith, not to cause it to falter. And yet, as we struggled to save this poor man's life, despite the grievance we justly had of him, I saw the looks of my fellow doctors. I saw how they glanced as the spark of life faded, then finally snuffed out, as if it were pity his corpse had been trampled and so, unless the tedious work of repairing its damage be somehow accomplished before it go bad, was of no use to them.

And, moreover, it was nearly summer....

At last first one, and then another, gave up the task. Dr. M\_\_\_\_\_ signed the death certificate, then singly and in pairs they departed, some of them murmuring that, at the end, the Irishman had at least saved them the problem of which, of the many he had sold himself to, would be able to lay claim upon him.

But I, I had studied in France as I say, and also Vienna. I had studied under T\_\_\_\_\_ and F\_\_\_\_\_ who, in their own turn, had been disciples of the celebrated Franz Anton Mesmer. I had a grounding, rare for a Scottish surgeon at that time, in the theories of Galvani, that animal life was the cause of electromagnetic force, and of their refutation by Volta. And I had, myself, formulated my own thoughts.

Thus, alone with this newly-dead subject, unable to save him by other means, I now determined to try these out. I called for servants, had them bring me Voltaic cells, a large tub of water, and salts and powders and coils of copper wire. Into the tub I placed the Irishman, fixing the coils to his hands and feet, and started the current.

I fully expected his feet to kick, as Galvani's frogs' legs did, a mere reaction as Volta had proved to the force that flowed into them from the charged cells. But I also expected, as Mesmer had, that there might

be more to it, that Volta as well had not seen the whole picture. And so I proved that night.

I never did publish the whole that I learned. And that for good reason. But Volta was wrong in not following up his work's conclusions. That, yes, it was true that animal life was not the creator of electrical forces, but—and this he failed to see—quite the opposite thing was the case. That Galvani, after all, had been the farther along the correct track.

*That, properly applied to a subject, electrical force was the cause of life.*

"But why?" one of we students interrupted as our aged instructor once more briefly paused. "That is, you say you still did not publish...?"

And then we heard again the odd buzzing noise from the hall below us, but louder this time and surely not of flies. Rather of some kind of apparatus. *And with it a loud scream!*

The old man nodded.

I'm almost finished (he assured us) but *there* is your answer. It lies in the pain. I brought the Irishman back to life, but the first thing he did when I did so was howl in anguish. The current coursing through his body—it must have hurt dreadfully. And yet I kept it on, modulating it, turning it down to a tiny trickle—his cries to a low moan—but never having quite the courage to shut it entirely off.

Rather I called back my fellow surgeons, having servants rouse them from their homes, from their very beds, to see this miracle I had accomplished. They, as I, agreed that unless I find some way to prevent the unimaginable suffering that this treatment necessarily brought with it, I should not publish a word of my findings. But also they agreed, even though the certificate be signed, that in that I had restored the corpse to life, it would be a violation of our solemn oath as physicians should any one of us endeavor to end it.

And yet... and I ask you now to remember what I said of flint hearts when I began this. And bankers and those of the legal professions.

For one of our number recalled the contracts. The contracts that each and every one of us had in possession, signed by this man's hand, willing to each the use of his corpse upon death for anatomical demonstration.

And, further, that Dr. M\_\_\_\_\_ had signed the death writ.

And *yes—you hear him now!*—that selfsame Irishman, that

*Galvanic*, that resurrected-himself-Resurrectionist, his still living cadaver long since repaired of its trampling, laid on the table below in the Hall awaiting our presence. We will get him drunk first, before we cut him, to deaden not so much the agony of his dissection, but rather to quiet him lest his continuing shrieks otherwise interrupt the lecture. And then, once more, we shall repair him of any damage—and some of the brighter of you may help us—for he will be used again and again, as he has before, waiting the time between each year's new lecture, each new group of students, within his tub in the building's basement, the current turned down as much as we dare. But still with him always.

And so you have now a lesson of surgeons, what you will become yourselves. And you know now of their minds that can match wits with barristers' when it comes to enforcing contracts. And hearts of flint as stone-hard as bankers' in calculating the compounds of interest and drawing out worth to its final penny.

But there is another thing too you have learned now: A surgeon's faith in God. And in the life God grants to each of us, through whatever means, and the alternative lest you should think that keeping this man in pain as we do for repeated cuttings might tinge of cruelty.

He did, after all, sign a number of contracts, which to break would violate God's law as well as Scotland's; and, for all we know, he may also have at times committed murder. We do know he was a cheat, and a blackmailer. We know thus something of his soul's condition, you see, and what would become of it should we release it.

And that is the crux. We argued it, yes, throughout that whole summer, I often as not saying "*No! Let him die now!*" But I at last, also, was brought to consensus:

That this is our oath, as God is my witness, to heal the sick—to bring the ill comfort in *soul* as in body. To pass on this teaching even as we are about to commence in the chamber below a few moments henceforth.

And, thus, what we do is an act of mercy. ●





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## CALEB IS DEAD

Maggie Flynn

I'M NOT A CONSPIRACY THEORIST. I DON'T BELIEVE, FOR EXAMPLE, THAT THE moon landing was filmed in Vegas, that the CIA controls us by putting drugs in the water, or that the planes never hit the building. However, I wouldn't rule out the possibility that Paul really died. I mean, would "And I Love Her" Paul write "Why Don't We Do It in the Road"? Speaking of the road, how many bands besides the Beatles have ever stopped touring and stuck with it? There had to be something going on other than burn out. I know what you're thinking, that those clues the band supposedly planted made the whole hysteria laughable. Why, you want to know, would a band trying to cover up a death go around putting symbols all over their album covers and backwards confessions in their lyrics? My answer: it was an attempt to put the new Paul in his place. Perhaps he became just as egotistical and insufferable as the first, and John knew that despite his good intentions, they needed a way out from under the mess they created.

Granted I never met either Paul, and I don't know that egotistical and insufferable adequately describes the first or the second. What qualifies me to make such suppositions is this: Yury, Rich, and I were in the studio a couple years ago, waiting around for Caleb, raking him over the coals for not having enough of his shit together to make it in by 10:30. Evening, not morning, and this happened all the time. You get two multi-platinum albums under your belt and it all goes to hell. Your singer's head is as big as a fucking watermelon, and he won't grace you with his presence until he's feeling inspired. Once he shows, your bassist and drummer have exhausted themselves trading asinine riffs to pass the time, plus they've depleted a good portion of the stash on the top of your amp—half a gram, half a bottle of whiskey—and you can maybe lay down one track before they get too blotto and you'll have to call it a night anyway.

It was worse that particular night, our first back in the studio after a month-long hiatus undertaken when Caleb decided he couldn't sing

another note until he cleaned up. Not that I wanted him to remain a junkie, but come on. At least Keith Richards had the decency to wait to detox until *Some Girls* was finished. Caleb, on the other hand, bailed just when we were starting to make some headway on the third album, the album intended to silence our critics' charges of recycled Cars riffs and monotone distortion once and for all. The pressure I felt to get back into the sessions was piercing as a high C note, so I booked studio time for the night after Caleb was supposed to return. He'd answered none of our phone calls, but that wasn't unusual. We'd always leave him messages telling him what time to show up in the studio and he'd always saunter in when he damn well pleased.

Here's a good tragi-comic detail for you. The particular Caleb-raking conversation we cut short when we saw Stiv enter the control room was the ongoing debate over whether or not Dose would be better off without him. We never let Stiv in on that one, since we knew he'd simply offer up some rhetorical question like were the Doors better off without Jim Morrison. End of conversation. We resumed our instruments and I began running a lead over the tired 4/4 boogie beat that Yury and Rich always played to warm themselves up and I've heard so many times it often makes me want to wrap my guitar cord around my neck. Stiv opened the door to the recording booth and without so much as a *bracing you might want to sit down for this* told us the news:

"Caleb's dead."

I cut out in the middle of a run, the scale hanging awkwardly, and Rich quit pounding on the up beat, as if the two of us were suspended in the air. Only Yury kept up his bass, thumping away at those low, hollow notes with his eyes closed until Rich threw a drumstick and clipped his arm.

"What?" I asked, as Stiv nonchalantly leaned against my amp and eyed the melting ice in the whiskey glasses and the traces of white powder as he always did: with an eyebrow raised just enough to let you know the general decadence had been noted and judged. Stiv is our manager. He's never told us his real name, but my guess is something totally un-rock'n'roll, like Charles or Burt. He wanted to be in a band himself, but his only real talent is bluntness.

"He never made it home from Switzerland. He died during the last transfusion."

Caleb did take one cue from Keith. He signed on for the infamous blood treatment: pump the junkie blood out, put clean blood back in,

and you never get another craving. Like you were never on the stuff. Though I didn't believe it would work, I still imagined him coming back different somehow. He'd get rid of Jules. He'd be my friend again.

"How did you find out?" I asked.

"They called me. Caleb put me down as his emergency contact, they said."

"Huh."

We've been estranged for years, of course, but it's like having an ex-wife. As long as she hasn't remarried, you expect to be the one getting the call. At least it wasn't Jules. His choosing Stiv at least indicated that the band came first.

"I'm sure he just put my name down because I'm the manager," Stiv said. "I wouldn't take it personally."

"Have you told Jules yet?"

"No, I figured the band deserved to know first."

"That he's dead?" Yury asked.

Now there are stereotypes about bands that you can't necessarily count on as true, but like a lot of them they exist for a reason. The one about bass players being the dimmest bulb in the band? Our Yury certainly wouldn't disprove it.

"Obviously, Yury," Stiv said.

"Fuck," Rich said, breaking a drumstick in two. "Fuck fuck fuck."

Rich, as one generally expects of drummers, is prone to excess and violence, and he's not exactly the most expressive guy in the world.

"Fuuuck!"

It's such an embarrassing thing when people know their own stereotypes and act accordingly, though I understand it. It's a way of living up to expectations and not having to figure out for yourself what you're going to do next. Of course a wild and beloved lead singer is going to croak at the height of his adulation, leaving his bandmates to age and put on weight and try to figure out the least offensive way to live off the legacy of Dose. And of course when his drummer finds out, he's going to start kicking over his drum set and stomping through their skins.

"That's right, man," Yury said. "We've got to let it all out."

Yury brought his bass overhead and back down fiercely, as if he were planning to turn the floor of the studio into firewood. The two of them looked completely ridiculous, performing at such close range the dramatic motions apt to please patrons in the back rows of an amphitheater, but I didn't mind. As the instruments met their doom the

vibrations filled my head so fully it was impossible to think about anything else.

"Guys, get ahold of yourself," Stiv said. As usual, the command of his voice brought them to a halt. "This is bad for all of us, but we've got to be strong for Tom right now."

They nodded and looked shamed, and then their eyes fixed on me as if I were up on a movie screen and it was the split second before the outpouring of grief begins. I wasn't sure what to do with their anticipation. I contemplated falling to my knees to weep, but I wasn't that good of an actor; in our videos the story parts revolved around Caleb, while the directors propped me strumming away on hillsides and in alleys, always partially removed from the action.

I avoided their eyes and picked up the Les Paul that belonged to Caleb. He played rhythm when we were in the studio, never knowing that I overdubbed all the tracks after he went home. I sat down with the guitar and strummed it softly, more expertly than the poor thing had ever been played in its life. I taught Caleb a few chords back when we were kids, neighbors and best friends growing up in Ventura. But even then there were girls crawling in his window and he never had enough time to play alone in his room to get good.

They watched me, waiting. I figured it best to deal with this like I'd dealt with the rest of it. Caleb stealing my girl, Caleb getting onto magazine covers without the rest of us; whatever trouble Caleb caused, I just picked up my guitar and let her rip. I've been described as the stoic of the band by sympathetic journalists, and while I know it's an easy way out for them to ascribe each band member a one-word identity, I have to admit they pegged me fairly accurately.

"Come on, let's leave him alone for a bit," Stiv said. Rich grumbled his assent and Yury stopped to squeeze my shoulder as he crossed the room.

"Thanks," I nodded, still not looking up until the studio door closed behind them and the control booth door after that. I guessed that I seemed appropriately broken up, but the truth was I felt empty, all of my emotions pumped out, like Caleb's tainted but vital blood.

I sat playing for a long time, my sense of Caleb's presence growing. This wasn't unusual. Whenever I was alone there I felt like he'd followed me, haunting me with the ugly hippie scarves he draped on the walls and tied around each microphone stand for atmosphere. I imagined him tripping over the tangle of cords as he stalked around with his eyes closed, summoning the right notes and delivery with your



typical lead singer dramatics. Why should any of that be different now that he was dead?

"Hello, mate."

Sometimes I carried on conversations with him in my head, too, but that night the voice came to me so clearly that I looked around the studio, sure he was there, and that the whole death of Caleb had been a joke Stiv and the boys decided to play on me. At first I felt a sense of waking-from-a-nightmare relief, then dread at still being saddled with him after all.

But there was nothing save the instruments, amps, drugs, scarves, and me. When I looked into the glass separating the booth from the control room, mine was the only reflection.

"Sorry to just take off like this in the middle of the third album."

The voice was apologetic, unlike the Caleb with whom I usually conducted mental arguments. I never heard him offering acknowledgment of wrongdoing. Now there was a gentleness in his tone reminding me of how shyly he'd suggested, listening to me play one afternoon, that we should start a band. We were supposed to be taking a geometry test but had gone to his house instead. He rummaged through his notebooks until he found a piece of paper worn with eraser marks and showed me some lyrics. They were garbage, but I reworked them and Caleb didn't mind. We had our first song.

"But you know as well as I do that the album was going to be complete *shite* anyways."

That was more like the voice I was used to. Snotty and peppered with Britishisms.

"You just weren't comfortable with taking the sound in a new direction. You were afraid to grow," I said.

"You call those retro-psychedelic guitar solos a new direction? Maybe, say, lullaby rock?"

"Heaven forbid we do something where you don't get to be front and center."

"Well, I think you lucked out. You have what? Six of my vocal tracks laid out, enough so it seems like your noodling solos are just filler and the critics will cut you some slack and everyone will still buy the album which otherwise would have been a flop. I'd say I did you a huge favor, Tommy Boy."

"Who says I'm even going to release your vocal tracks? Maybe this is the time to do a solo project."

This marked the first time I'd ever threatened Caleb with a solo

project. Usually that was his territory. He was always looking for opportunities to sully Dose, whether recording demos of his own wispy songs or poring over bad movie scripts.

The studio echoed with his laughter. "Listen, mate, just because I'm dead doesn't mean you should kill your career."

Even though Caleb and I haven't gotten along since the first tour, I've always been able to admit when he has a point, and he had one right then. I would be no more a solo star than I was able to get laid before the band got big. When it came to star power, I had less than the back-up guy from Wham!

"Maybe you're right," I said. "People care about this band, and they probably will whether you're in it or not. Maybe we'll finish this album with someone else."

"You're thinking of carrying on the band without me?"

"Yeah, I am."

"Good luck with that. Worked out great for the Doors."

I caught a glimpse of him then, walking out of the sound booth, the menacing hunch in his shoulders doing nothing to dampen his height. I didn't think for a minute it was the last time I'd be seeing him. Maybe the next time he visited, he'd see that what I was going to do would be for the good of both of us.

When Stiv and the boys came back to the studio, I had the drum carnage contained and the plan all formed.

"We just get a new Caleb," I said.

"I don't know if we should be auditioning new singers already, Tom," Yury said, bent over the remains of his destroyed bass, picking up shards of wood. "I think it's important that we go through all the stages of the mourning process first."

"Not a new singer," I said. "Just another Caleb."

Yury and Rick openly exchanged what-the-fuck looks, but Stiv was already on the page with me.

"We don't let on that he died?" Stiv said.

"Exactly."

"I hate to see the Dose paycheck go as much as you do," Stiv said, sauntering over to my amp and helping himself to a line, a rare treat for him. "But Caleb was one of the most recognizable faces in rock. Not to mention one of the biggest attention whores. He would've granted an interview to *Gardening Weekly* if they'd ever asked. It's not going to be that easy to make people think they're listening to the same voice and

seeing the same face, even if we did find someone.”

“So we turn him into a recluse. We’ll delay the third album and leak stories about how Caleb’s freaking out. He won’t do any more interviews. He’ll turn his back on the public.”

“And when the third album finally is released, it’ll sell more copies than ever,” Stiv said, talking fast and rubbing his nose. “Say, got any more of this?”

I drew the rest of my stash from my pocket and the four of us stood around my amp, passing a rolled-up bill, ironing out the details.

“I suppose I’ll have to bribe the detox facility to keep it under wraps,” Stiv sighed. “Hopefully not too much, though. Killing off a rock star can’t be good for business, and I don’t know that what they do there is exactly legal.”

“But don’t you think they’ll have ethical concerns?” Yury asked.

“Switzerland helped Nazis,” I offered. “Surely they’ll help us. What should we tell Julianne?”

Stiv frowned, race-walked a couple of laps around the studio, and returned to the circle with his pronouncement. “I’ll call her and say there were some complications with the treatment and that he won’t be able to call her, but should be home in a couple weeks. We’ll figure out how to have Caleb break up with her later.”

“I still don’t see why we can’t just keep recording as Dose with a new singer,” Yury said. “People who like us will like us with a new singer.”

“Like people dug the Velvet Underground without Lou Reed?” Rich asked.

“Or Van Halen without David Lee Roth?” I asked.

“Actually...” Yury said.

“OK, fine, they got lucky one time. But everyone knew by then that Roth was an asshole,” I said. “Caleb is one of the most beloved singers in rock.”

I meant for this reminder to rally us, but I regretted saying it as soon as Yury’s eyes welled up, though that could’ve been from the coke. Just to be safe, I laid it on a bit thick.

“Come on, guys. It’s up to us not to let his legacy fade. We’ve got to carry on with a new Caleb. He was getting new blood so we could make an amazing record. It’s what he would’ve wanted.”

“No, it’s not,” Rich said. “But I think it’s best for the rest of us. I’m in.”

“Me, too,” Yury shrugged.

And that was that. Stiv and I found our new Caleb playing an outdoor beer garden in Muncie, Indiana, fronting for Morning Glory, an Oasis tribute band, but he looked more like our singer than theirs, and had down Caleb’s phony British speak to boot. To err on the side of caution, however, we flew him directly to a Beverly Hills plastic surgeon who came highly recommended in both talent and discretion and immediately set about more perfectly replicating Caleb’s Greek nose, wide-set eyes, strong chin, and so on. We figured if it didn’t turn out quite the same no big loss: unnecessary plastic surgery was one of the first and best indicators of a celebrity flipping his lid.

Stiv and I were there the day the bandages came off, me figuring at best I’d feel I was seeing one of those celebrity look-alikes who sometimes get their photos in magazines, but we were dumbstruck by the revealing, and new Caleb mistakenly thought something had gone horribly wrong.

“Give me a bloody mirror,” he demanded of the nurse. Then he saw for himself that if you put him next to the first Caleb, even his best friend couldn’t have told the difference.

“We need to check one more thing,” I said. “Take down your pants.”

“What?” He and Stiv asked in unison.

“What if he ends up boning a groupie who already boned the first Caleb? We need to see that everything matches.”

“Can’t believe I didn’t think of that myself,” Stiv said. “Caleb, let’s see.”

He stood and scowled, unzipping and dropping his pants. I took a step closer and he took one back.

“How did you know what his cock looked like?”

“We had gym class. He used to skinny dip when his parents weren’t home. You know, the usual stuff. It’s not like I was trying to look, if that’s what you’re implying. Incidentally, you’re a few inches short.”

“You do implants here?” Stiv asked the nurse.

“Of course.”

“Christ,” Caleb said, retrieving his pants. “Are you gonna check my molars, too? How ‘bout my nose hairs?”

“Caleb,” Stiv said, “You’re getting a bigger package out of this deal. Unless you prefer going back to Indiana?”

He did not, so we sent him to his new home to recover, and forbade him to leave until he moved, dressed, and talked like his

predecessor. We removed his belongings from the house Caleb shared with Jules during the week she traveled to Hawaii on a modeling gig. Since she officially broke up with me by ransacking my home while I was pulling an all-nighter in the studio, we imagined she'd get the hint.

When it came time to try him out in the studio, we didn't even tell Yury and Rich his real name. I promptly forgot it myself, figuring the sooner we started thinking of him as Caleb, the easier it would be to integrate him with the band. Though this Caleb proved far more punctual and easy to work with, he needed lots of coaching:

"Slur your Rs a bit more."

"Sing *in*' not *ing*."

"Do that, you know, dying animal moan thing."

"Quit pronouncing your Gs, goddammit!"

But on his behalf, he brought an energy and freshness to the studio we haven't had since our first sessions. Certainly we wrapped the recording a lot quicker than we could have with the first Caleb arguing that my riffs undercut the poetry of his vocal phrasing. We'd leaked a multitude of stories about our singer's erratic behavior and were delaying the release a bit longer to build more hype over Caleb's apparent breakdown. Our PR guys told us Spin was running an article asking "Is It the End for Dose?" in the next issue and we wanted the album to follow directly.

I was sitting in the studio late one night working on the final mix by myself when Julianne came by, all dark lipstick and drama as usual.

"What's going on with Caleb?" she demanded, sitting next to me at the control panel and lighting up a cigarette without asking, one of her many habits I couldn't stand when we were together. Now, I couldn't take my eyes off of her fingernails, painted dark to match her lips, and I wanted her to keep smoking so they'd be in sight.

"What do you mean?" I asked. She pushed back her velvet Che Guevara cap and let her cigarette dangle from her lips unattended.

"I never heard from him once he got out of detox. He never came back to the house while I was there and now there's a for sale sign out front and Stiv's evicted me."

"Oh, so he just dumped you without an adequate explanation? Damn, that must have been hard, Jules. Maybe he left you for one of your best friends."

She rolled her charcoal-lined eyes, refusing to deal with my feelings as she always had. "None of his friends have heard from him. He's not returning anyone's phone calls."

She shrugged, exhaled, and blew a stream of smoke that wafted directly into my face. I hate cigarettes, but the ones Julianne smoked smelled to me like her flowery perfume: heartbreakingly sweet.

I'm not above a few rock star clichés myself. I met Jules on our buzz-generating club tour, right before the first album came out, and fell for her not because she was intelligent, funny, or kind, but because beauty was her sole attribute. Having her next to me made me feel as if I really did belong in this world of backstages and tour buses. Before her, I always imagined people looking at pictures of the band and picking me as the Mick Mars, the Charlie Watts—you know, the one who didn't fit. But Jules coached me on dirtying up my wardrobe and looking entitled. She was the key to my confidence and how could I not fall in love with that?

I know it's absurd to imagine Caleb jealous of anything, but before Jules I was completely in his shadow, hiding behind my amp for the duration of our shows. After her, I was able to move up and share his mic on harmony parts, and I caught him watching her in the front row as if she were some sort of sorceress. On the night Jules went back to Caleb's room instead of mine, I banged on his door like a fool for a full five minutes until Caleb stuck his head and bare torso out.

"Dude, let it go," he said. "She was using you to get to me."

"And you're OK with that?"

He shrugged. "I guess it worked."

Facing her in the studio now, I tried to call back some of the anger I felt that night, but being the object of Jules' icy blue gaze prevented it.

"So what's the story, Tom?"

As I mentioned before I'm not much of an actor, but I had something at stake here. I put my head in my hands.

"It's been awful, Jules."

"Aww, Tom." She scooted closer to rub my back. I knew she was doing it to coax the scoop from me, but she still could've had anything she wanted from me right then.

I took my hands away from my face but could only look at the mixing board in front of me. I spoke to the nobs and levers. "He's bonkers. He's turned into a total recluse. Won't talk to any of us, either."

"Not even you? You're his best friend, Tom."

"I was until he took you."

Julianne stood. "I'm not a trophy he could steal. I made a choice."

"I know," I said, following her out of the control room and into the lobby.

"I'm going up there to see him," she said. "And I'm not leaving until he lets me in."

I grabbed her shoulder and she turned to face me. I kept a hold of her, gently, looking in her eyes. I could hardly believe she was letting me.

"Jules, I care about you and can't let you do that. He's out of his mind right now and I don't know what would happen to you."

Then tears started down those perfect porcelain doll cheeks and her pointy little nose started sniffing. "Tom, I'm sorry about everything."

She let me kiss her, making sure her place close to the band was reserved, but I didn't mind. Caleb wouldn't be coming back to claim her any time soon.

"So where are you staying?" I asked.

"In a horrible little studio in Echo Park," she snorted, her voice full of indignation.

"Plenty of room at my place."

She didn't answer, but hid her face in my chest which was good as a yes. I always knew that I'd get Jules back from Caleb once she understood who really made the band indispensable. I slid my hand down to her ass and looked around, wondering if Caleb was there to see it.

We were taking a risk by touring, but the turn Caleb had taken mobilized the music-buying public and Stiv convinced us of the lucrateness of sustaining their interest. Dose III stayed at number one for fifteen weeks, during which time Caleb watched all of our concert footage, mimicking each hip swivel and pout until he knew just when to apply them. We took other precautions as well. We stuck to moody, dark stage lighting and had him periodically freak out during the set, turning his back to the audience or singing behind Rich's drums.

None of this was easy on Caleb. To make a comparison: how would you feel if you were led to believe you'd be living like *Appetite for Destruction* Axl but instead got stuck in *Chinese Democracy*? No clubs, no after parties, nothing. This is not to imply that Stiv wasn't willing to make him a few concessions. Stiv always scanned the audience for an attractive girl to drop off at his hotel room, one who seemed drunk enough that her memory would be impaired should Caleb make any late night confessions.

One night, I made the delivery. She wore a Dose t-shirt, tied at the waist and cut away at the neck to show off her volleyball-sized fake breasts. Her face was attractive in a bland, mannequin sort of way, and I thought Caleb would be pleased, but he merely shrugged as she stumbled into his room, squealing and placing her arms around his neck as if grabbing hold of a buoy.

"Everything all right?" I asked, peeking at his room from the doorway. He'd draped the appropriate number of scarves, but kept the room much neater than his predecessor.

"I guess so," he said, making his way to his bed and untangling the girl. He gave her a push, not unkindly, helping her fall back onto the mattress. He walked back to the doorway, "Want to come in for a minute?"

"Sure," I said.

I didn't want to keep Jules waiting too long at the party in our suite, knowing her wanderlust far too well. Still, I was touched that Caleb barely registered the girl passing out on his bed and picked up a guitar instead.

"I asked Stiv to get this for me. I want to learn how to play," he said. "Maybe you could teach me a couple of songs?"

"Yeah," I said, grabbing the notepad beside the telephone. "Here, I'll write down a few chords."

The room smelled sterile and stuffy like all hotel rooms, but it also had that patchouli scent Caleb once used to cover up marijuana and never outgrew. The new Caleb at first balked at having to put the oil in his hair, but from its overpowering presence I guessed he'd worked his way up to a liberal amount.

"Try these," I said, handing him the notepad.

He crouched over it, saying the name of the chords aloud as he got to them.

"Skip F for now," I said. "No need for bar chords yet."

I probably don't need to tell you what a poignant moment that was for me, like we were back in high school. I couldn't remember the last time Caleb had let me teach him anything.

"Remember how I showed you 'Not Fade Away'?" I asked.

"Huh? You haven't taught me any songs yet."

I ignored him, remembering instead the refuge of Caleb's childhood bedroom, the Jagger posters and records strewn everywhere. Finding Caleb wasn't unlike finding Julianne, or any of the other girls I've fallen in love with. Not that our friendship was ever marked by any



homoeroticism or anything like that; I just mean there was that spark of finding someone you could understand, who understood you, too.

"Say," I said, "Maybe I'll blow off the party tonight and we can jam instead."

Caleb shrugged. "Cool," he said.

"I'll go grab my guitar and take her back to the party," I said, reaching for the girl who was on her back, moaning softly and running her hands up and down her protruding ribs.

"No, she can stick around for later," he said.

Just like Caleb.

"I've written some songs," Caleb announced, throwing a notebook in my direction.

We were back in the studio, and everything was the same as it had been the night Caleb died, except the whiskey was so far untouched and there was no cocaine out of respect for Rich. He rehabbed after we got done with the tour.

"Caleb quit trying to write songs before we even put the first record together," I said, with Yury and Rich nodding in support.

"Well, now that I'm a recluse, I have lots of time on my hands to write songs," he said.

"That makes sense," Yury said. Yury had his head shaved and was wearing a silk robe. He didn't rehab, but cleaned up by becoming a Buddhist during the Asian leg of our tour.

"Fine, let me look," I said, and found a lot of amateur bullshit, the usual stuff about fire, desire, taking you higher.

"We can't use these," I said. "But if you write anything of quality, maybe then. In the meantime, I have eight songs already, so we can get started on those."

"Fine," Caleb said, taking the notebook back. "Maybe I'll record these on my solo album."

Caleb was—had always been—an ungrateful bastard. I should've seen it coming. Surely he was reading the same articles as I, the ones positing that Caleb broke down because he was dissatisfied with his lack of creative autonomy in the band. Unnamed sources even called me a control freak. I thought this time he'd be happy to sing the lyrics I wrote and think he's playing guitar on a few tracks. But if there's one thing you can count on in this world, it's people making the same mistakes.

Yury flipped through the notebook, nodding his head. He closed it

and said, "You know, I think there's some good stuff in here."

"Thanks," Caleb said.

"I think we can work with it. Tom, what you need to ask yourself is how your ego is affecting your resistance to these songs."

"If we're recording his songs, we're recording mine, too," Rich said.

"Rich, we're not recording any songs about sex with underage girls," I said. "That territory has been completely mined before us."

"I've written songs about other stuff, too," Rich said, his black eyebrows creased so deeply they met at the bridge of his nose. I've seen him make that face before, right before he kicked five guys' asses at the Rainbow. He got up from behind the drum set and went for the whiskey, tearing off the foil seal and drinking straight from the bottle. Rehabbed or not, once his whiskey switch got flipped we were headed straight for destruction.

"You should bring them in, then," I said.

"Really?" He recapped the whiskey, wiped his mouth, and sat back down at his drums, the storm passing from his face.

"I'm working on songs about attaining Bodhisattva-hood," Yury said, stroking the scraggily goatee he'd been cultivating. "I thought they were a little deep for the band, but maybe if we're moving in a more collaborative direction..."

Rich and Yury went on like that for awhile, blathering excitedly, while Caleb stood petting the scarf around his neck and smiling like someone who'd gotten a hard-on after years of being limp. We didn't get much work done that night and I only laid down some decent rhythm tracks after I sent the rest of them home. I'd been figuring I was due for another visit from Caleb the first, and I got one that night.

"So, mate, little plan not working out quite how you wanted?"

I looked around the studio, hoping to see him. I couldn't, so I fixed my eyes on his Les Paul. The new Caleb broke a string that night, and I'd refused to fix it for him. How pitiful that dangling string looked, like it was trying to jump overboard from a sinking ship.

"No harm in letting them record some of their rubbish songs," I said, cringing at my use of Caleb-speak. "Then when it's time for the final cut we'll bring in an outside producer or someone who'll tell them their songs are shit."

"I don't think it'll be that easy, Tommy boy. They were pretty fired up tonight. Maybe it is time to record your solo album. People would be understanding, given that you convinced them I went nuts."

"You'd love to see that, wouldn't you? I bet when you're not here,

you're rolling around in your grave it makes you so mad I kept the band together. But you know what? This is my band and it always has been. No one's taking that away from me."

"And what about what you took away from me?"

"What? Julianne?"

"No, not Julianne. I don't have much use for her anymore. I'd keep my eye on her if I were you, though."

"What do you mean?"

"What you took away is my dead icon status. What about my *Rolling Stone* cover with no headline, just my birth and death dates under my portrait? Kids wearing my T-shirts to school everyday?"

"I kept you alive, Caleb. I did this for you!"

"They should be selling fucking blacklight posters of me in every head shop," Caleb went on, ignoring me. "But instead you're making everyone think I'm just going to be another weird over-the-hill has been."

"Has been?"

"Face it, Tom. The last album wasn't that good and from the sounds of it tonight, this one's going to be even worse."

I stood, refusing to let my dead singer berate me this way. I made my way out of the studio, hoping he couldn't follow me out. Whether or not he could, he didn't. I drove home fast, with the radio turned all the way up, in case his voice was lingering. When I got there the house was quiet and dark. Jules was nowhere to be found.

"You've been with him, haven't you?" I asked.

This was days later, when Julianne finally surfaced. She'd walked in the front door and her eyes barely registered me. She said nothing and went to sit on the back patio. When I walked out she was sitting at the table with her knees drawn up to her chest, staring at the ocean. I asked her again and she didn't answer right away. I stood shivering, waiting for her response. The wind was awful and I wondered how she'd managed to light her smoke.

"Yes," she said.

Why I kept giving Caleb chances at betrayal stumped me. I wished for a moment that I'd just let him die, then immediately felt guilty for thinking it.

"And you still want to be with him, even though he's... different?" I asked.

"He's not that different," she said, still not looking at me. "He's still

Caleb. He's just been through some changes. But when it's the two of us, it's the same Caleb I've always known. I just came here to wait for the movers to take my stuff over there," she said, her straight blonde hair lashing across her face. She closed her eyes as if it hurt.

"Jules, I'm in love with you."

"No you're not. You're in love with Caleb."

"Caleb's dead," I told her.

She stood and butted out her cigarette on my wood table, leaving a black smudge. I let her go inside without following though I was freezing out there. I watched the waves overtaking the shore and thought about what my *Behind the Music* would be like. They'd obviously bring the camera crew out here and shoot me walking on the beach, but what would I be talking about? I couldn't tell them how I'd lost the best friend who betrayed me but I forgave again and again, and I couldn't tell them how I'd fixed it so I wouldn't have to. At this point maybe we wouldn't even get a *Behind the Music*. I began to admit what I'd been too stubborn to see before.

A death befitting rock stars should be splashy, messy, and extravagant; seen by teary-eyed witnesses, and therefore impossible to cover up. These were my thoughts driving to Caleb's in my Lamborghini Diablo, a fine car that I'd hate to see go, but really the only one appropriate to the task at hand. Driving into the hills, the stars usually become magically visible, but this was one of those humid late summer nights, and the sky was muddy and unmarked.

I punched in the code to Caleb's gate and pulled into the winding driveway. Growing up we lived less than a mile from each other's houses, then shared grubby Hollywood apartments after that. But once the money came in he opted for the hills, me for Malibu. Just another way the success pulled us apart, I guess.

Caleb was crouched against his front door, smoking a cigarette, no doubt waiting outside so I wouldn't have to see Jules in there. Not that I cared. She was of little use to me now.

"Hey," he said, opening the car door. He smashed his cigarette under foot and got in.

"Hey," I said.

"Thanks for picking me up," he said, trying to play off his earlier reluctance. When I'd called and said I'd give him a ride to the studio, he hemmed and hawed and I figured that must be what a survival instinct sounds like.

"So you wanted to talk?" he asked while I pulled out of the driveway.

"Yeah, in a little bit. Let's just enjoy the ride," I said. "Mind if I put the top down? It hasn't really cooled off tonight."

"Yeah, I've been hot all day. Go for it, dude."

I turned the radio up and let the scenery in my headlights go by in a blur. The wind picked up speed, the car momentum.

"Hey, man, there are some wicked curves up here," Caleb shouted. "You might want to slow down a bit."

Instead I accelerated. We were only a couple minutes from the exact spot I'd chosen to go over the edge.

"Don't be scared," I said. "You were right."

"Right about what?"

"You deserve your dead icon status."

"I never said I wanted dead icon status," Caleb yelled, white knuckles wrapped around the passenger door. He might have been thinking of trying to get out, but at the speed we were going, the results would have been inevitably the same.

"Only it'll be better this way. We'll be dead icons together. I was wrong to say it was my band, Caleb. It's our band. It has been since we wrote our first song."

We were coming up on the spot and I had the car going as fast as it could. In my peripheral vision I saw Caleb throw off his seatbelt and lunge towards me. He deftly straddled me, squeezing himself between me and the wheel, pressing his back into my face so hard I could've suffocated. He put one foot on the break and used his other leg to keep mine away from the accelerator. I moved the wheel left and right wildly and felt us careening accordingly, but it was no use as we lost speed. The road stayed firmly beneath us. Still not able to see a thing, I let my body surrender. Caleb flung the door open and rolled out, all the way into the ravine. I watched him spring up and run down the hill.

"Fuck you!" he screamed without looking back. I closed the door.

I sat deflated for a minute, watching him grow smaller, imagining him gaining momentum until he was practically flying down the hills. I thought of the relief he'd feel when he made it down to civilization, hitching a ride to the studio with some fan who spotted him dazed and out of breath on Franklin Avenue. He'll be so talkative and happy to be alive the kid giving him the ride will think he's speeding. But years from now when he's back on the fair circuit with Yury and Rich by his side, he'll regret that he got so uptight. He'll wish he'd trusted me.

"I love you, Caleb!" I yelled as I pulled away. I put the accelerator to the floor and felt the gears grind and the car lunge, then carry me forward once more. I'd meant to do this for him, so he could have his blacklight posters and magazine covers, but now I saw that it didn't matter. What mattered was Caleb and I would be together, like we always were, like we were meant to be.

I approached the cliff and thought that maybe Caleb would come back to take me through it, but when I went over, I was alone. ●

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## THE SIMPLE ACCOUNT OF SERGEANT SHEA, IMMEDIATELY PRIOR TO THE END OF THE WORLD

J.C. Tabler

*"Welcome to Historic Innsmouth, Where America's Dark Past Comes to Life! Destroyed in a 1927 raid by Treasury Department agents, Innsmouth was home to a complex and all-encompassing bootlegging operation. After a pitched firefight that destroyed historic structures, agents arrested residents. Thanks to Depression-era labor, donations of money and material, and a growing interest in America's criminal past, Innsmouth was restored and repopulated with a mixture of long-time residents, descendants of our original founders, and professionals from outlying regions."*

-From *Innsmouth!*, a pamphlet by the Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce and Tourism

WELCOME TO HISTORIC INNSMOUTH, WHERE AMERICA'S DARK PAST COMES to life. I'm Sergeant Jack Shea, and you're trespassing after the park's official closing time. Stand and keep your hands where I can see them at all times.

To answer your first question, the thing on my chest is a microphone. It hears everything I say, but you'd have to yell to get on tape because it's really supposed to record what I say and do. We've got to watch out for lawsuits in this town, we have some mean lawyers in these parts. Secondly, this is public property, but not the way you mean. These cliffs are part of the historic revitalization act and aren't open after dark. Don't worry, you won't spend a night in jail or get hauled up in front of a judge. We'll just take a quick walk back to my cruiser, check your identification, make sure you're not wanted for murder... that's a joke, sir, you can laugh... and I'll give you a criminal trespass warning. Means you can't be on this piece of property again after closing time, for your own safety. Lots of ways for a man to get hurt wandering these cliffs after dark.

Hey, hands out of your pockets! Look, it's just a precaution. I got

a buddy, works over in Salem, says he gets all the crazies. I told him he'll find more loony-tunes folks hanging around out here. Salem's only got witches, and they can't be too violent with all that Earth magic and such. Here we get guys trying to save the... oh boy, what do we have here? You had a gun in that pocket? See, now you've gone and made a liar of me about how bad this can get.

I know, you've got a permit for it. I believe you. I really do. Thing is, we get a lot of folks who come up here at night, every few months, who claim they have permits for whatever gun they may have, or machete, or, and you're going to love this, icepick. Like you need a permit for an icepick. If you had tried to draw this thing, or, looking at it, if it had been loaded, you'd be in a world of hurt right now. My life's hard enough without scrawny fellows in tweed jackets running around the cliffs at night with firearms. So let me tell you what we're going to do now. We're going to take a little walk, I'm keeping this gun, and check your background.

Stay in front of me and in the light. Don't you go worrying about that fire, I know who it is and they're locals. That's none of your concern. Watch out for the log, there's a ditch on the other side with a nasty tumble. Every few weeks we have to take somebody in to the hospital after Mr. Penny calls us on his way back from meeting. Nice guy, Mr. Penny, runs the bed and breakfast down on Main Street. His brother did a lot of the demolition and reconstruction back when the town was rebuilt, so he has a lot of pull. That's an old-time family, funny looking but nice enough as long as you don't get them going.

Yes, I hear the chanting. After I make sure you're not a killer or something I'll probably have to run back up there and ask them to keep it down. What? No, I don't know what the words mean, and to be honest I don't care. We've got strict orders about that sort of thing here in Innsmouth, ever since the Chief got threatened with a lawsuit a couple years back. Whatever they believe is up to them, and if you've got a problem with that you can take it up with whatever knucklehead in the IRS gave 'em tax-exempt status as a church.

You aren't a killer, right? If you are you need to tell me now, cause I don't like surprises. Professor, eh? Let me guess... Occult Studies? We get a lot of you guys poking around from time to time, ranting about star alignments and dimensional gateways. Where are you from? Miskatonic University? Never heard of the place, but I'm not from this part of the state so if it's local I wouldn't know too much about it. Still twenty years away from my twenty-five-year retirement. Besides, it isn't



as if you're a real professor, studying history or anything. You're just another strange blip on my radar, Doctor.

So, my buddy in Salem. He tells me I need to visit and see how many strange folks they have coming by, praying to the spirits of tortured witches, painting their faces with enough black makeup to give the NAACP a heart attack. We're taking a left here, by the way. Other fork doesn't really go anywhere except down to the beach. My buddy, though, he says those kids are just a pain. I tell him that he needs to handle this place, what with guys like you swinging by screaming about ancient horrors and all the locals with their problems.

For example, Mr. Jacobs and his wife get into it about once a week. Sometimes they'll fight over normal stuff, mowing the lawn or washing dishes. You ask me, Mr. Jacobs oughta just give in, after he married that girl from the swamps outside of New Orleans. She's one piece of fire, I tell you. We calm them down, get them to agree on something and go on about our business. Other nights, though...

Whoa, hey, don't try to run! Sorry to grab your collar, we can wait for a second while you catch your breath, Doc. You shouldn't make a run, though, because I know this area better than you, I've got your gun, I'm younger, and I'll just whip out my tazer... it's the yellow thing on my belt... and shock the living shit out of you. Go on, take a seat over, we'll wait while you catch your breath. Besides, we're almost back to the cruiser and I really don't want to have to ask those guys up there to keep their voices down.

Mind if I smoke? Thanks, you want one? They're Camels, full flavor, none of that light crap, that okay? You're welcome. So, the Jacobses sometimes get into it about other stuff, mostly when Mr. Jacobs comes back from his Order meetings. Yeah, the Esoteric Order of Dagon, nice group of people, little off-kilter, but they were behind rebuilding the town and I can't complain. Mayor's one of them. Strange church, if you ask me.

Anyhow, Mr. Jacob's an Acolyte in the Order, but his wife's a different denomination. Kind of like Protestants, both of them in the same tree but sitting on different branches. Those are bad nights, normally we haul one off in cuffs just to keep paramedics from getting involved. You should hear those two go at it, her yelling about "Great God Cthulhu" and him going on about "Dagon's bounty from the sea." She'll be heaving herself around like some backwoods princess wearing the royal muumuu, he's half-cowering on the porch thundering about sunken cities and world-swallowing gods. Elder God this, Great Old

One that... it gets on your nerves after a bit.

Got your wind? Alright, let's go. Just follow the light, keep your eyes on the ground. You try to run again, there'll be some trouble. If you want, feel free to file a complaint with my supervisor in the morning. I'll give you a business card with all my information on it if you check out clean.

"Acolyte" is just another word for crazy if you ask me, Doc. Always going on about their great and powerful Gods, Cthulhu the Destroyer of Worlds, Dagon, rituals and crap. Me? No, I'm not from here. I'm from South Boston, a Catholic. They can have their squid-like, world-destroying god, I've got the Pope. If there's one thing I've learned, you don't fuck with an old man in a huge hat. Came up here because the pay was higher for cops in Innsmouth. Never heard of the town before then, except in a couple of Prohibition documentaries. Not a bad place, kinda homey if you ignore the cults and such.

Alright, sit on the hood while I call this in. Dispatch, this is Patrol 12-Adam calling from Obed Marsh Park. Yeah Cindy, I've got another lurker up here, watching the Order's ceremony. Uh-huh, Professor of Occult Studies, Miskatonic University. Really? Let me ask. Hey, Doc, you remember a student named Cindy Starling? No shit? Yeah Cindy, same guy that taught you. He looks alright, I guess, but I need you to run a background, cross-check to make sure he has a Conceal and Carry permit, okay?

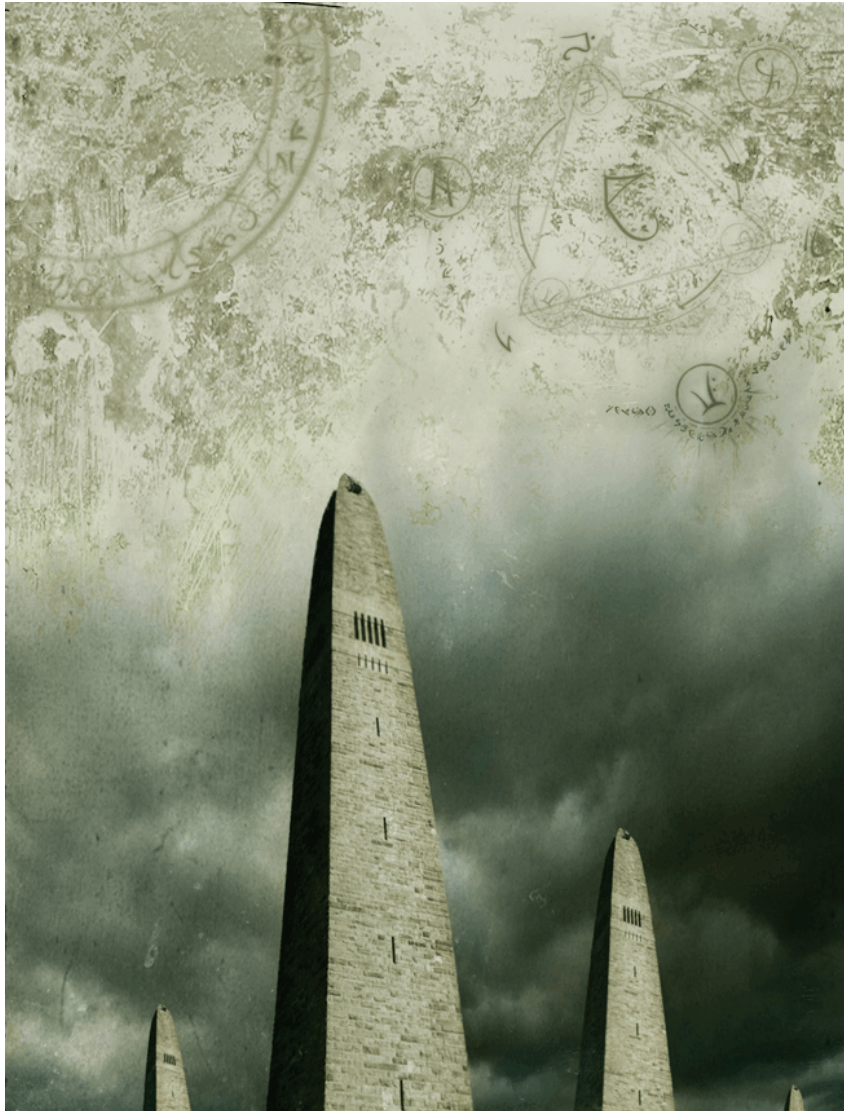
So... was Cindy pretty cute back then, Doc? I know, you're not supposed to notice that sort of thing, but c'mon. Well, she's blossomed since then, man. Pair of bazookas, blonde hair down to here, legs going into tomorrow night. Everyone back at the station wants a... hold on. Yeah, I'm here, Cindy. Really? Nothing? What about the gun? Alright, I'm just going to cite him then, make sure he goes back to his hotel.

Looks like you lucked out. Clean as a whistle, licensed to carry, so I'm going to write you a citation and send you on your happy way. Just to let you know, we keep patrols up here every time the Order has a ritual. This may be the last one, though. Mister Penny said something earlier today about tonight accomplishing everything. Whoa, hey, you alright? It's not a heart attack or anything, is it? Take my arm, man, let me help you up.

What? No, I'm not going to stop them! For the love of Christ, man, have you ever heard of the First Amendment? Freedom of Religion, no matter how out-and-out freaky it is. Chief'd have my balls, especially after we dodged a lawsuit about stopping that symbolic sacrifice

business last year! Besides, even if they were really about to unleash something that would destroy the world, I don't have anything to get them on. See, they got all the proper permits to be there after dark, have a bonfire, everything. So even if I'd like to help, my hands are tied. C'mon, Doc, let's get you back to your lodgings.

Oh, no need to thank me. Hell, we're the Innsmouth Police, sir, and we're always happy to protect and serve. ●



## CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

SUNDER CAMERON ADDAMS ("Book-Learnin'," page 46) is an author/editor who writes when not editing research papers in the fields of medicine, psychology, and other realms of forbidden knowledge. Sunder is a member of Broad Universe, and her website-in-progress at <http://sundercameronaddams.com> shall soon sport a logic puzzle based on the story.

LAWRENCE BARKER ("Jacasser's Gold," page 39) lives outside Atlanta, Georgia, but travels to Alaska whenever possible. His novels *Blood Red Sphere* and *Mother Feral's Love* are both available from Swimming Kangaroo Press. Lawrence's short fiction and poetry have appeared in *Weird Tales*, *Hungur*, *Towers of Light*, and a variety of other periodicals. His short story "Cyrus Fell's Blues," a tale of a space alien vampire in 1950's Georgia, won the James Award for 2007.

CHRISTOPHE DESSAIGNE ("HP Lovecraft's Dream-Quest Of Unknown Kaddath," cover illustration) is a French artist whose work has appeared on book and CD covers, and has recently been featured in *Advanced Creation* and *PSD Photoshop* magazines. His online gallery can be found at <http://www.midnight-artwork.com>.

JAMES S. DORR ("The Galvanic," page 63) had his new book, *Darker Loves: Tales of Mystery and Regret*, released December 2007 by Dark Regions Press as a companion to his 2001 collection, *Strange Mistresses: Tales of Wonder and Romance*. Recent acceptances include a novelette "The Garden," published in chapbook form by Damnation Books, and short stories "River Red" in the anthology *Escape Clause*, and "Sombras" in *Nostradamus' Fate and Other Dark Prophecies* forthcoming from Dark Regions.

MAGGIE FLYNN ("Caleb is Dead," page 72) is a freelance editor and writer living in Los Angeles, where she received her Master's Degree in Creative Writing from the University of Southern California. Her nonfiction has appeared in publications such as *Where L.A.*, *L.A.*



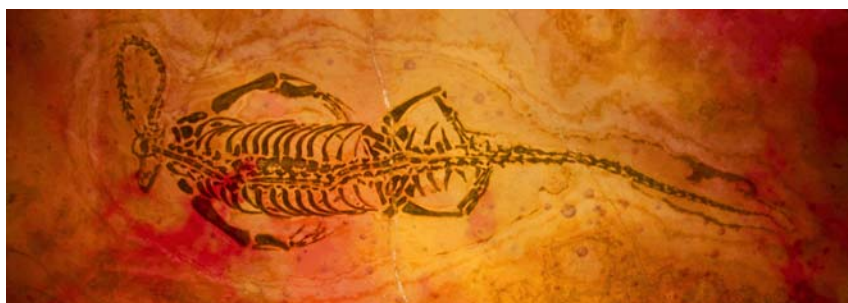
*CitySearch*, and *Performances*. Her fiction is forthcoming in the *Salt Flats Review*.

DOUG GOODMAN ("Queen Anne's Corpse," page 14) is a writer living on the Texas Gulf Coast. He has published in the anthologies *Cthulhu Unbound* and *Horrors Beyond*. His website is [www.dougoodman.net](http://www.dougoodman.net).


ANNE M. PILLSWORTH ("The Patience Rose," page 29) lives near Providence, Rhode Island, the heart of Lovecraft country. Her short stories have appeared in *Zahir*, *Bellowing Ark*, *Mindflights* and *Night Terrors*. She is currently working on her fourth novel.

ROBERT J. SANTA ("The Caverns of al-Shog Qaleth," page 5) has been writing speculative fiction for more than twenty years. His work has appeared in *Paradox: The Magazine of Historical and Speculative Fiction*, *On Spec*, *Artemis* and *Every Day Fiction*. He is the owner of Ricasso Press (<http://www.ricassopress.com>) which launched in 2008 with three anthologies: *Black Dragon*, *White Dragon*, *Magic & Mechanica* and the first in a shared world series *Magistria: Realm of the Sorcerer*. He lives in Rhode Island with his beautiful wife and two equally beautiful daughters.

J.C. TABLER ("The Simple Account of Sergeant Shea, Immediately Prior to the End of the World," page 90) lives the wilds of Kentucky with his wife, children, and a veritable zoo of animals, and is not to be considered a very nice person. Having been raised by a pack of feral attorneys, he since became a bartender, bouncer, legal assistant, manure handler, and steamboat deckhand. His work has appeared in *Allegory Ezine* and in the upcoming *Northern Haunts* and *Harvest Hill* anthologies.



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